

## Fire and Petrels: The Mystery of Mondrain Island

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We were shark-fishing near Remark Island, in the Recherche Archipelago, Western Australia, on Sunday, January 23, 1944, when the skipper observed the smoke from fires on Mondrain Island some thirteen miles to the eastward. Now, in this part of Australia, the lighting of three fires is the accepted signal of distress from persons lost in the bush, so we immediately decided to investigate this outburst which seemed all the more strange to our skipper because all attempts at burning off Mondrain Island had previously failed and not even kerosene could help to ignite the accumulated undergrowth there. The island and the adjacent mainland are uninhabited and outside the usual run of any transport.

Mondrain Island, as we approached, looked like a chain of small volcanoes, a sad sight for any naturalist, for on this island sanctuary about five miles long and up to one-and-a-half miles wide, dwell animals, including birds, plants and lowly forms of life which have been isolated from the mainland for thousands of years.

More than seven serious bushfires billowed their plumes of various colours from the blackened and fire-raked hill-sides into the pale hot sky. A spout of black smoke suddenly came up over the high middle saddle of the island, puffed out into the shape of a tree, branched like a fleur-de-lis, then dissipated into the dirty pearly smoke screening most of the island. Was this a signal? Two more pillars of black smoke later shot up from separate fires. If these were signals of distress, then whoever lit them was a too-thorough incendiary.

By early afternoon, when we were a mile or more off the island, the flames, red as our ensign, were clearly visible and there was an acrid smell of smoke. A mutton bird (*Puffinus carneipes*) skimmed by in the now freshening sea-breeze, and ten little birds, smaller than sparrows, fled towards the mainland as we approached the north end of Mondrain Island; these were soon followed by others and we assume they safely weathered the six-mile journey to the shore.

We peered and scanned for survivors of—we knew not what, various speculations shuttling through our minds. A mutton bird sat like a duck on the water, sad and solitary. Flecks of light grey ash flew past. We worked around the eastern side of the island. Flames about sixty feet high raked the gullies, their dull crackling being audible against the wind and above the rhythm of our engine. A mutton bird sat on the water and flapped its wings, but we did not

then know the distress which caused this unusual action. An imperturbable shag perched on a rock, with a dramatic background of smoke-swept slopes, pinnacles of fire, blackened mallee, and the grey ravished patches of stone-strewn hillside. A huge cumulus cloud of smoke formed an umbrella above, whilst below a slow surge lazily licked the granite shores.

We landed on the north-eastern end of the island, after having unsuccessfully searched around it for signs of human beings. Hereabouts I was pained to observe many mutton birds roasted black and some of them already swarming with small black ants as they lay in the cooled ashes. What had happened was evident: the feet of these ground-roosting birds burn first and curl back, the webs shrivel, the toes are red-raw and the birds can only rattle them over the rocks unable to walk, they flap their wings and the primary feathers and the breast press the hot ground, become charred, and finally the birds are incinerated. It was difficult to walk in the deep, hot ashes, and the blackened bushes striped us as we pushed through them. Some places were, of course, inaccessible, and we did not wish to be encircled by an inferno so kept to areas whence the fires had passed. It was therefore impossible to say how many mutton birds had been destroyed, but I saw several dozen bodies in a few hundred yards. There may have been more, to say nothing of birds trapped in sandy burrows or under rocks.

How easily a terrible bushfire such as this could exterminate a unique island species.

Nevertheless, there were several birds singing in the bush and I caught a glimpse of a small hopping bird deep in a rocky cave by the shore. Another member of the party saw several wallabies further inland.

After a search of several hours, we left the island, passing another poor floating petrel waiting for its end. We had no clue as to what had started the fires and had found no traces of human beings. Soon, Mondrain Island was almost hidden by a veil of smoke. It burnt fiercely for several weeks and may be burning still. For instance, at Esperance on February 10, it was a fiery hot day and some specimens of cuttle-bones in my shady room were cracking in the heat, whilst temperatures of more than a century were reported from most parts of the State: Mondrain Island still looked like a volcano and there were big bushfires on the mainland. The smoke from Mondrain had spread across Esperance Bay and obscured our customary view of the islands off Dempster Head.

Fortunately, the petrels are not restricted to Mondrain Island and have not been exterminated, for that night, just off Esperance, the bat-like forms of numerous mutton birds could still be seen skimming tirelessly over the moonlit sea.