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Crested Terns and Silver Gulls Nesting on Little Island

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Little Island is the smallest of three islands lying off the entrance to Port Stephens, New South Wales. It is a bare rocky outcrop some thirty-five feet high, about one and a half miles south-east of North Head. The two other neighbouring islands are Cabbage Tree, well known as the breeding place of the White-winged or Gould Petrel (*Pterodroma leucoptera*), and Boondelbah or Big Island.

During the past twenty-five years I have landed on Cabbage Tree Island many times, to investigate the varied bird-life found thereon. However, until recently, I had never been on Little Island, which was well known to me as a resting place for Silver Gulls, terns and cormorants.

In September 1953, when trolling around the island for mackerel, I noticed a fairly large concentration of Crested Terns on the central and northern portion of the island. In former years they usually gathered at the southern end, near a reefy outcrop over which the sea constantly breaks. The birds were still present in November and December and it was evident that they were nesting. I learned later that a local fisherman had been on the island and had reported many nests with eggs or nestlings.

A landing is not easy, except in calm weather, and it was not until early January 1954 that I was able to get ashore from a small plywood dinghy. The island then seemed to me to be considerably higher than its stated 'thirty-five feet'. The length would be in the vicinity of one hundred and fifty yards, and the width possibly a little less.

Young Crested Terns, almost ready to leave their nests, were seen at the northern end. At my approach some of them scrambled down to the broken water as it rose and fell on the smooth rocks below. Others remained, being apparently unwilling or unable to move away. It was obvious that nesting was almost over, and that most of the young birds had taken wing.

The birds that made for the sea were immediately washed from the rocks by the first swell and carried well out from

the shore, where they paddled about among a number of Silver Gulls. Both Gulls and Terns were swooping and diving above me as I climbed over the island.

No nests contained eggs, and only a few nestlings of both Gulls and Terns were present. The Terns seemed to favour positions near the water, whilst the Gulls chose the higher and more central portion of the island. Numbers of dead nestlings were noticed and some of these appeared to have been partly eaten, perhaps by birds of prey. Both the Black-cheeked Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and the Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*) are known to hunt the adjoining islands. The only signs of plant-life were a few sparse outcrops of grass in rock crevices. Most of the eggs had apparently been laid on suitable rock surfaces, and generally on the western side of the island. Such a location would be exposed to the strong summer north-easterly winds, yet protected from south and south-easterly weather.

All young birds seen were well grown and would be, in the normal course of events, on the wing within a week or two. A friend who was waiting for me in the dinghy was very amused by the actions of the young birds as they attempted to get back on to the island. They paddled about in the swell and waited for a suitable wave to wash them up over the rocks. As soon as they felt the rocks under their feet, they scrambled quickly to safety before another swell carried them back again. There was a considerable amount of jostling when two or three came in at the same spot together. A fledgeling seen when we were returning to my launch, was partly waterlogged, with only its head showing above water. We took this bird and dried it in the sun, afterwards tossing it close to the island, as we left.

I have not recorded Crested Terns nesting on the islands off Port Stephens before, but have seen Silver Gulls breeding on North Broughton, a small island about half a mile north of the main Broughton Island, in December 1939.* Possibly Crested Terns nested there also at that time, as immature Terns were seen every day roosting on the cabins of fishing launches in Shoal Bay, just inside the Port Stephens heads. I think it is highly probable that the birds have selected Little Island as a nesting place, due to the increase of fishing launches travelling past the island. Many parties fish in these waters at week-ends, and the birds follow the boats home as the fish are cleaned, feeding on the scraps thrown overboard. The older birds become so used to the boats that they will deftly catch pieces of fish tossed to them from the stern of the boats.

The Terns normally obtain their natural feed near the islands and the shoreline, very seldom being seen very far

* Hindwood, K. A. 'Notes on the Sea-Birds Breeding on the Coastal Islands of New South Wales', *Emu*, vol. 48, August 1948, pp. 73-81, pls. 10-13.

out to sea with the Shearwaters. During the normal run of the summer pilchards, they feed on those fish to a large extent, and also may be seen diving for the common yellow-tail which is abundant around the shallow parts of the islands.

The Silver Gulls appear to work the beaches and breakers more, following the schools of travelling fish such as tailor, mullet and salmon.

At certain times of the year the Gulls appear to desert their normal marine feeding grounds, and it is a common sight to see them as far inland as Maitland and Muswellbrook (to where they have followed the Hunter River from the mouth at Newcastle) some twenty and eight miles inland respectively. In some of the large swampy areas left after the frequent Hunter River floodings, Gulls congregate in great numbers at times.

It is the usual thing for the newspapers to report such happenings as being due to stormy weather at sea, but I have noticed that these inland migrations have occurred when the conditions at sea have been anything but stormy. On the Hexham swamps, which are about ten miles out from Newcastle on the Maitland line, I have seen flocks of Silver Gulls of from twenty to fifty birds scattered all over the area, feeding on the marshy ground. No doubt many of these birds come down from Port Stephens, some twenty-five miles north from Newcastle, and also from places south of that city.

It may be due to a falling off of plankton and other natural marine food, and it may be due to the desire for a change of diet which by some means becomes suddenly known to all the Gulls for miles around.

Recent Observations on Some Birds of the Swan River District

By JULIAN R. FORD, Fremantle, W.A.

Since Dr. D. L. Serventy published his paper on 'The Birds of the Swan River District, Western Australia' (*Emu*, vol. 47, p. 241), the writer has made some observations in this district which might be of general interest and, in particular provide some new facts on the distribution of *Malurus pulcherrimus* and on the breeding range of *Petroica goode-novii*.

Malurus pulcherrimus. Blue-breasted Red-winged Wren.

Serventy does not include this species in the district census but includes the closely-allied species *Malurus elegans*, of which he says—"In 1943, and on several occasions since, L. J. McHugh observed Red-winged Wrens, including