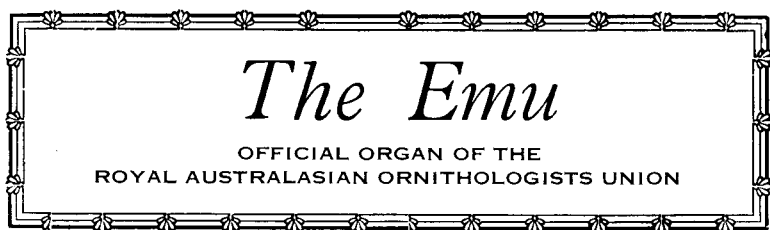




Marsh Tern alighting at nest

Photo. by P. Crosbie Morrison



'Birds of a Feather'

VOL. 55

NOVEMBER, 1955

PART 4

Breeding of Marsh Terns on Coode Island

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Coode Island is a flat, marshy wasteland situate two miles to the west of Melbourne. It is covered, in places, with salt grass, beaded glasswort and samphire. Many years ago the Coode Canal was cut to facilitate the passage of shipping along the Yarra, forming an island between the new artificial channel and the old river. During the ensuing years most of the old river bed has been filled in and Coode Island is now an island in name only. It is directly across the river from Fishermen's Bend.

The record eighteen inches of rain which fell in the Melbourne district during the last quarter of 1954 was followed by an exceedingly good growth of herbage and generally created conditions which attracted Whiskered or Marsh Terns (*Chlidonias hybrida*) to Coode Island where they bred, presumably for the first time on record.* Inhabitants of the inland marshes, the breeding birds were a novel feature within sight and sound of the city of Melbourne. Indeed the birds were photographed at nests with the city skyline in the background!

The Terns were first noted on December 29, 1954, feeding in an area which later proved to be the main part of the nesting colony. On January 5, 1955, a detailed survey of the colony revealed a total of fifty-two nests. Thirty-nine of these had three eggs, eight had two eggs and five had one egg each. There were two nesting areas separated by forty yards of clear water.

The nests, comprised of *Salicornia* and salt grass, were built on clumps of the former, isolated by water. Most of them were flattish and untidy structures, a few only being shapely. Some nests were decked with Silver Gull flight feathers. The nesting 'cavity' was about four and one half inches in diameter and about half an inch in depth.

* The breeding at Point Cook recorded by C. E. Bryant (*Emu*, 49, 267) appears to be the closest to Melbourne of recent years.—Ed.

In some cases the eggs had an irregular ring of blotches near the larger end. The measurements (in millimetres) of sample clutches measured by Mr. Harold Tarr were—

Two-egg Clutches—

- (a) 37.25 x 27.5, 41.5 x 29.75 mm.
- (b) 39.4 x 27.9, 38 x 28.
- (c) 40.75 x 27.2, 41.5 x 28.1.
- (d) 39 x 28.5, 39.25 x 28.
- (e) 37.75 x 28.25, 37.5 x 28.25.

Three-egg Clutches—

- (i) 24.5 x 19.25, 38.75 x 26.75, 38 x 28.
- (ii) 39.1 x 26.75, 39 x 26.5, 37.8 x 26.25.
- (iii) 39.25 x 27.75, 39.25 x 27.5, 38.75 x 28.5.
- (iv) 39.6 x 27.75, 36.25 x 26.5, 36.75 x 27.75.
- (v) 37.25 x 29.75, 39 x 28.5, 38.5 x 27.75.

The abnormally small egg in clutch (i) failed to hatch. One egg only hatched from this clutch of three. In all cases the single egg 'clutches' failed to produce chicks.

By January 15 hatching was general throughout both nesting areas. The young were sandy brown in colour, with brown mottling on the back and with white throat blotch and black beak. As soon as dry, the chicks moved the short distance to the water's edge and drank. They remained then hidden in the *Salicornia* surrounding the nests, presumably for protection from the sun's rays and natural enemies. Forty-eight hours after hatching some chicks were observed being fed about ten feet from the original nesting clump.

The parent birds took turns at feeding and sheltering the young. Feeding was by regurgitation. Occasionally both birds were observed at the nest. Sometimes both the sitting bird and the young would be fed by the other parent. Unhatched eggs and empty shells were removed from the nests. Over all, the hatching appeared to be about sixty-six per cent. Approximately ninety-three chicks hatched. Of these, four were later found dead.

On January 27 only two nests were left occupied, one containing two young and the other one egg believed fresh. This egg later disappeared. By this time the colony had moved to an area about half a mile to the east of the nesting site.

By February 10, 1955 all the Terns had left Coode Island.

During the nesting the birds were most pugnacious, vigorously attacking most intruders whether human or feathered. However, White-headed Stilts were often observed feeding within the nesting area and were not molested by the Terns.

Five pairs of Hoary-headed Grebes and a pair of Black Swans nested within the colony, but none of these hatched young. A pair of Silver Gulls vainly attempted to nest on an old nest of a pair of Swans between the two colony areas.