

VISIT TO THE MONTE BELLO ISLANDS

21ST TO 24TH AUGUST 1985

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INTRODUCTION

I visited the Monte Bello Islands from 21st to 24th August 1985 in company with Mr Len Turner (Department of Resources and Energy, Canberra), Mr Ian Leith (Radiation Laboratories, Melbourne), and Mr John Wallace (Department of Housing, Perth).

Transport to and from the islands was arranged through the courtesy of the Royal Australian Navy on patrol boat HMAS 'Geraldton' (Commanding Officer - Lt. Commander Ron Hunter, RAN.)

Three days were spent surveying the islands during which period the following visits were made :-

- North-West Island - thoroughly covered on foot except the extreme western quarter of the island.
- Primrose Island - entire island covered on foot.
- Trimouille Island - circumnavigated by boat with brief visits to inspect raptor nests and a one hour inspection on foot of the Middle Beach area (central Western side of the island).
- Alpha Island - the west coast of Alpha and the  
North Delta Island - east coasts of North and South  
South Delta Island - Delta Islands were inspected by boat. Foot surveys were carried out in small mangrove coves bordering these shores.
- Hermite Island - the extreme south east corner of the Island was traversed on foot.

The objectives of the visit were :

- to locate and map as many raptor nests as possible;

- to make observations of tracks and scats to determine concentrations of introduced black rats and feral cats;
- to make general bird observations;
- to document human activity in the islands;
- to ascertain whether the debris from concrete pillboxes destroyed by the SAS with explosives needed cleaning up.

All but the final objective were achieved. I did not have time to visit the pillbox sites.

### BIRDS

Thirty species of birds were observed on, or closely adjacent (within 1 mile radius) of the islands. Details are as follows :-

Wedge-tailed Stearwater (Puffinus pacificus)

Circled the ship every night; apparently attracted by the ship's light.

Australian Pelican (Pelecanus conspicillatus)

One seen flying over Primrose Island.

Pied Cormorant (Phalacrocorax varius)

20 to 30 observed on two consecutive days on a rocky islet adjacent to Primrose Island.

White faced Heron (Ardea novaehollandiae)

One feeding on a mudflat on Hermite Island.

Eastern Reef Heron (Egretta sacra)

Frequently seen on the rocky shores of Northwest, Primrose, Alpha, Delta (N & S), Hermite and Trimouille Islands. The dark phase of the species outnumbered the white phase in the approximate ratio 10:1.

Osprey (Pandion haliaetus)

Observed frequently throughout the islands. Appeared to favour the northern and eastern sides of the islands for breeding. 10 active nests were located and their positions are marked on Map 1. 5 nests were closely inspected and all contained chicks varying in age from newly hatched to half fledged.

Black-shouldered Kite (Elanus notatus)

One observed on North West Island.

Brahminy Kite (Haliastur indus)

One observed on North West Island.

White-breasted Sea-Eagle (Haliaetus leucogaster)

One pair seen on North Delta Island. Two pairs were breeding on the eastern side of Trimouille Island (nest sites shown on Map 1). Two of the nests were closely inspected and both contained downy young.

A further nest, containing one egg, apparently belonging to this species but deserted, was located on North West Island (see Map 1).

Brown Falcon (Falco berigora)

One individual observed on the west side of Primrose Island.

Australian Kestrel (Falco cenchroides)

One seen on North West Island, and two on Trimouille Island.

Pied Oyster-catcher (Haematopus longirostris)

Occasional pairs seen on North West, Primrose, North Delta, Alpha and Hermite Islands.

Sooty Oyster-catcher (Haematopus fuliginosus)

A number of pairs seen on all islands visited. More frequent than the Pied Oyster-catcher.

Mongolian Sand-~~pl~~ayer (Charadrius mongolus)

10 feeding in a muddy inlet on the south end of Hermite Island.

Ruddy Turn-stone (Arenaria interpres)

6 feeding in muddy inlet on the south end of Hermite Island.

Whimbrel (Numerius phaeopus)

One seen on Alpha Island.

Grey-tailed Tattler (Tringa brevipes)

Approximately 10 feeding in a muddy inlet on the south end of Hermite Island.

Common Sandpiper (Tringa hypoleucos)

One seen on North West Island.

Bar-tailed Godwit (Limosa lapponica)

Five feeding in a muddy inlet on the south end of Hermite Island.

Silver Gull (Larus novaehollandiae)

Very few seen. occurred sporadically on most islands visited.

Caspian Tern (Hydroprogne caspia)

Territorial pairs were seen on headlands on Alpha, Hermite, North West, and Primrose Islands. Probably breeding; the two pairs on Primrose Island mobbed me as I walked through their territories.

Fairy Tern (Sterna nereis)

The most frequently seen tern in an around the islands. A flock of 20+ birds appeared to be resident but not breeding on a sandy beach on the central eastern side of Trimouille Island. Other small flocks were seen to the north of Trimouille, on the south of Hermite, and in the sheltered waters of the channels between islands, as well as around the anchored ship.

Crested Tern (Sterna bergii)

Small groups seen resting on sandbanks at low tide in the channels between the islands. Nowhere common.

Common Noddy (Anous stolidus)

Three individuals on a tiny islet a few metres off the north-western tip of Primrose Island. The islet was inaccessible, but I suspect they may have been breeding due to their attachment to the islet in spite of my continuously disturbing them.

Bar-shouldered Dove (Geopelia humeralis)

The odd pair found in mangroves on Primrose and North Delta Island. A typical dove nest (empty) in mangroves on N. Delta probably belonged to this species.

Horsfield Bushlark (Mirafra javanica)

Individuals & pairs seen in sheltered parts of most islands visited.

Welcome Swallow (Hirundo neoxena)

Pairs seen around low limestone cliffs on North West, North Delta, and Trimouille Islands.

Australian Pipit (Anthus novalseelandiae)

One pair on North West Island.

Yellow Silver-eye (Zosterops lutea)

Invariably seen in small numbers in clumps of mangroves.

Masked Wood-swallow (Artamus personatus)

One individual seen on North West Island.

The bird survey possibly added one or two species to the records for the islands. It confirmed the findings from previous surveys that both land and sea-birds are surprisingly scarce in and around the islands. The only two species to appear in the numbers expected in such habitats are the osprey and the white-breasted sea eagle.

## MAMMALS

### Introduced Rat (Rattus rattus/norvegicus)

Tracks were seen on all islands visited on foot. On most islands they were sparse to common. The exception was the Middle Beach area of Trimouille Island where tracks up to 15cm wide, and very heavily used, crisscrossed the ground every 3 to 5 metres. Rat activity in this area appeared prodigious.

### Feral Cat (Felis domesticus)

Very few signs were seen of the species. No definite footprints were observed.

Two very old scats were collected on Primrose Island, and another member of the party (Mr Ian Leith) reported finding two scats in the centre of Trimouille Island.

### Unidentified Species

Unidentified tracks were seen on North West Island (very frequent) and the western side of Trimouille Island (occasional). They closely resembled a rabbit's track but were much smaller; from fore to hind feet the track covered a length of no more than 10-12cm.

The tracks were photographed. On being described to the Principal Research Officer (Wildlife) he considered they may belong to a species of bandicoot. A sketch of the tracks is shown in figure 1.

## TURTLES

Turtles (presumed to be green turtles) were seen frequently in the channels between the islands (where they were observed mating), and on two particular beaches where they appeared to be breeding or about to breed.

The two beaches, both with turtles out of the water, laying in the surf, and with tracks up the beaches, were on the north side of North West Island and on the north west of Trimouille Island. These sites are marked on Map 2.

## CASUAL FAUNA OBSERVATIONS

### INSECTS

Apart from the odd large grasshopper and a few small ants, insects appeared to be scarce. The exception was the south-eastern tip of Hermite Island where at least 3 species of ants were frequent enough to be a nuisance, and spiders webs were encountered walking through the spinifex.

The only island with termite mounds was Hermite where they were frequent. This raised a doubt in my mind about the naming of the island; could 'Hermite' be a typographical misrepresentation of 'Termite'?

#### REPTILES

Monitor Lizards (Varanus sp.) about 60cm long and rusty-brown in colour were seen on Trimouille and on Primrose Islands. Varanus tracks were also seen frequently on North West Island.

One gekko and two skink species were observed on the southern tip of Hermite Island (hiding under old sheets of corrugated iron). None were captured or identified.

#### HUMAN ACTIVITY

##### RECREATION

Little recreation activity was seen, despite the fact that my visit took place at the coolest time of the year. Over the 3 day visit there was one recreation boat regularly observed, one left shortly after we arrived, one spent the night at anchor near the naval patrol vessel, and one appeared on our last day on the islands.

The waters immediately south of North West Island appeared the most popular anchorage in the islands, with entry gained via the North Channel.

##### WORKING PARTIES

A Working party of two men fixing the position of the drilling rig offshore from Lowendal Islands was camped at the south end of Trimouille Island during the duration of my stay (see Map 2). They were twice visited by a helicopter.

A W.A. Maritime Museum party of about 7 people was camped on the southern shore of North West Island. They were diving on the wreck of the "Tryal" located about 12 nautical miles north of the island.

##### PEARL CULTURE LEASE

I met the lessee, Mr Richard Morgan. As well as maintaining oyster rafts in his lease area, Mr Morgan has other rafts outside the lease area (see Map 2), and intends applying for extensions to his lease to secure these areas. I am advised that the situation is quite legal within Western Australian Law. However, he has no legal security over his rafts that lie outside his lease.

Mr Morgan maintains a floating workshop and a houseboat in his lease area. His staff, who were resident in the houseboat for the period of my visit, included one Japanese technician for seeding pearlshell, and at least 3 (possibly more) Vietnamese workers.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The unidentified mammal tracks, common on North West Island, are worthy of further investigation. A trapping programme should be conducted as soon as is possible.
2. I was advised by Mr Len Turner (Department of Resources and Energy) that control of the Monte Bellos is likely to revert to the W.A. Government, and hence to the Department of Conservation and Land Management as Nature Reserve (Hermit Island) and National Park, within the next 12 months. We should start considering management options for the islands, and firming up the management proposals that already exist.
3. Due to the remoteness of the islands, I believe we shall remain heavily dependant on the Royal Australian Navy to provide transport to the islands for management staff. Liaison with the R.A.N. should be maintained.
4. I have the impression that the Department of Resources and Energy (Canberra) are eager to hand over the islands in as clean a condition as possible. A survey is necessary to determine which debris/artefacts associated with atomic-blast testing on the islands have an historic/tourist value and should be left in situ for these purposes. Failure to conduct such a survey could result in the loss (through cleaning up) of some interesting material.
5. The Pearl-culture lease, if it does not already contain such a clause, should include provision for a marked boat passage for vessels to negotiate Faraday Channel without fear of damaging oyster rafts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- to my scientific associates on the trip for the enjoyable company.

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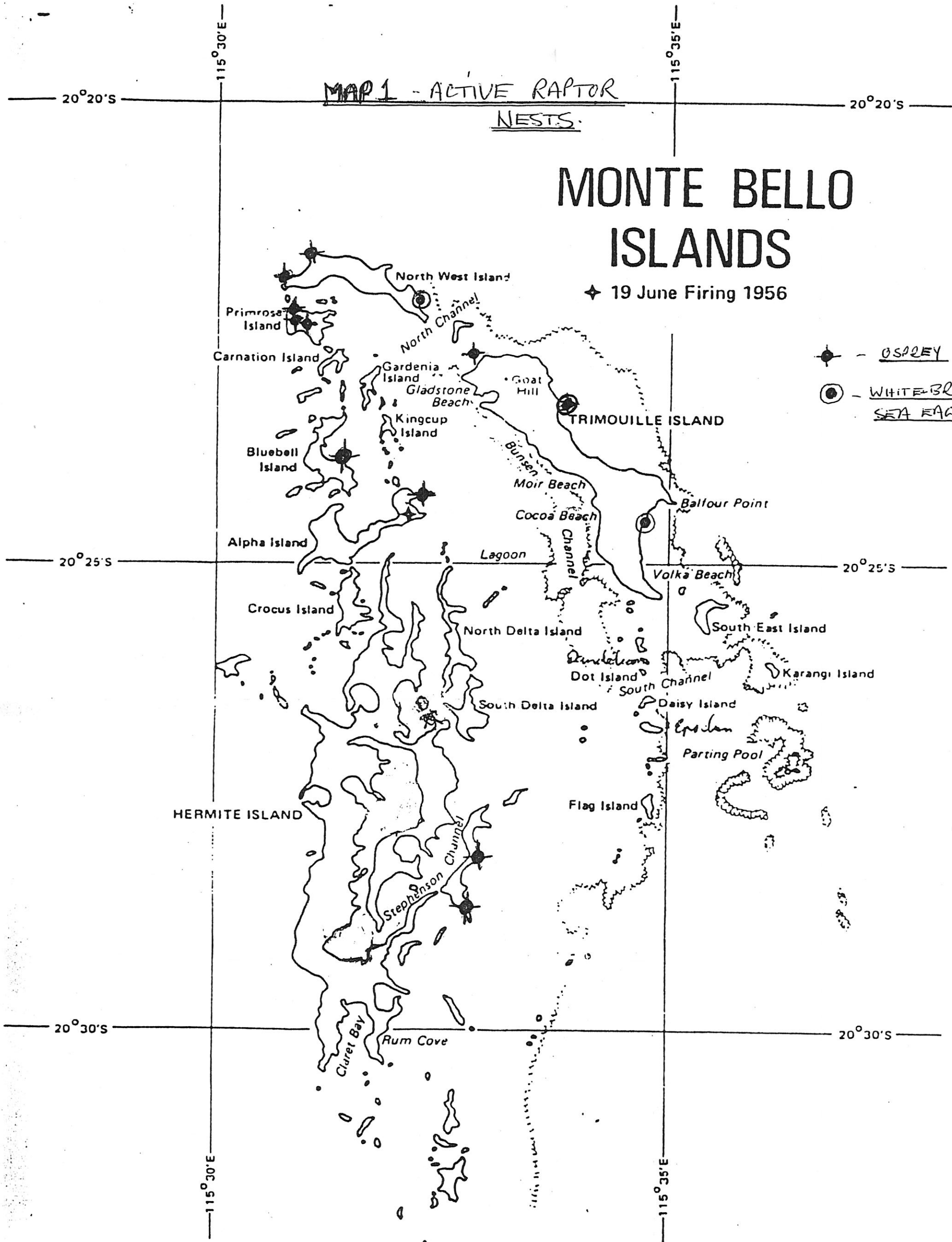


MAP 1 - ACTIVE RAPTOR  
NESTS.

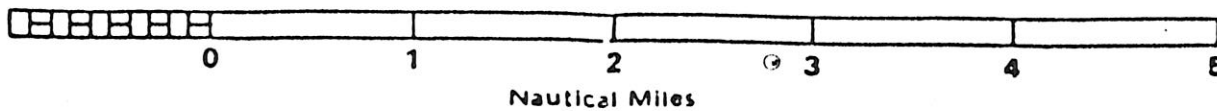
# MONTE BELLO ISLANDS

19 June Firing 1956

- OSPREY
- WHITE-BREASTED SEA EAGLE



Scale

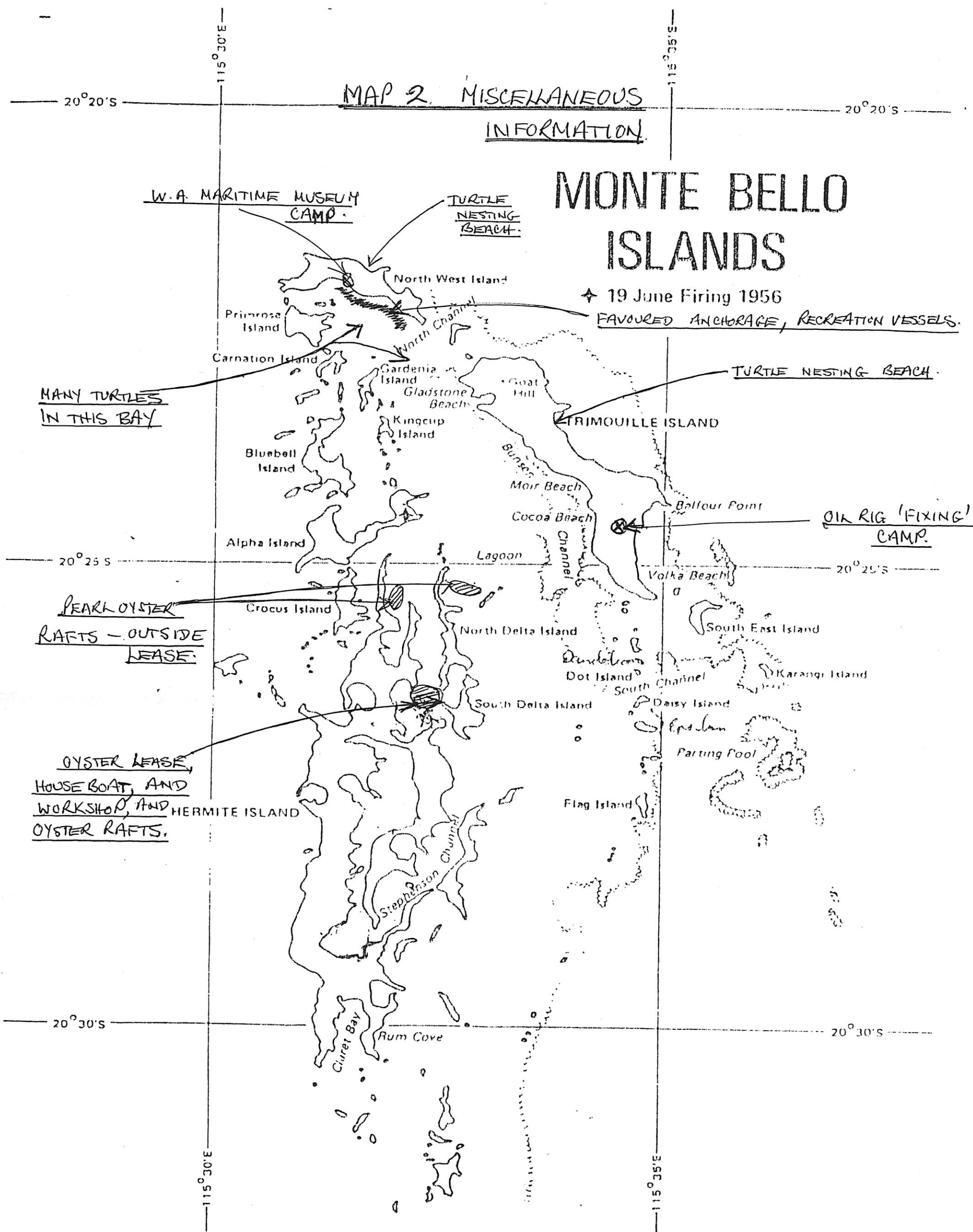


MAP 2 MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

# MONTE BELLO ISLANDS

★ 19 June Firing 1956

FAVOURED ANCHORAGE, RECREATION VESSELS.



Scale

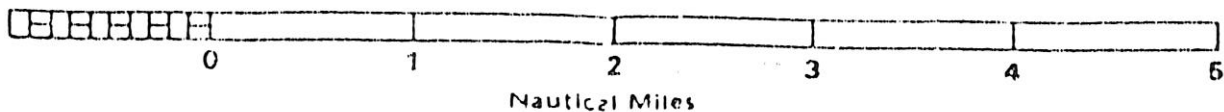
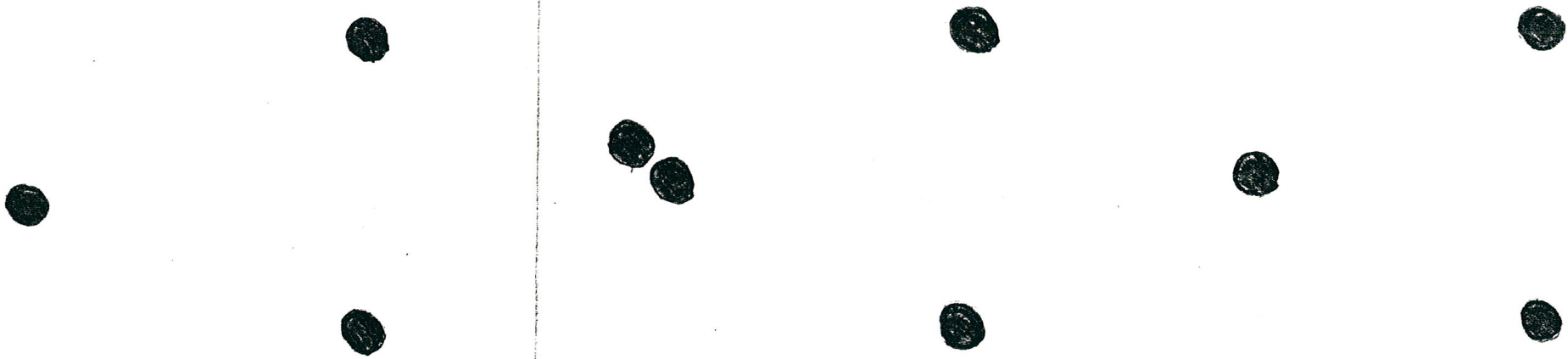


Figure 1.  
Unidentified Tracks (North West and Trimouille Islands)  
(approximately natural size)



Unidentified tracks

Northwest Island

21-8-85

Unidentified tracks. Northwest Island 21-8-85