

REPORT ON VISIT TO THE MONTEBELLO ISLANDS

28th OCTOBER to 31st OCTOBER, 1987

On the 28th October, 1987 I departed from Dampier on the H.M.A.S. Bunbury for a three day visit to the Montebello Islands. Leaving Dampier at 1030 hrs with Mr. Pat Davron from the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and an officer from the Australian Radiation Laboratory in Melbourne.

We arrived at Trimouille Island at 1530hrs, anchoring in Bunsen Channel to the west of the Island. A large number of Caspian Terns were observed east of the island group on the way in, but few were seen around the islands.

That afternoon I went ashore with Mr. Davron and some navy personnel to inspect the condition of the radiation warning signs throughout the island.

On Main Beach and Cocoa Beach I observed large numbers of green turtles in the shallows, many of them mating. There were approximately fifty females basking on the shore line and many tracks going up the beach indicating that they were also nesting.

Osprey's were observed on Lily Island, just south of Trimouille and north of Main Bay on Trimouille. The nest north of Main Bay is on a headland and there was one juvenile flying and two adult birds. I could only see two adult Ospreys on Lily Island but that was observed from a distance. Other birds observed on Trimouille Island were Sooty Oyster-catchers, Welcome Swallows, Silver Gulls, Fairy Terns and Pied Oyster-catchers. One pair of Sooty Oyster-catchers became very aggressive when being approached indicating that a nest may have been nearby but none could be found.

Rattus rattus tracks were prevalent throughout the island and many skulls were seen. Feral cat tracks could also be observed.

Varanus lizard tracks were in abundance as well as many scats which consisted of mainly fur, likely to be from rats. Varanus tracks seemed abundant on turtle nesting beaches indicating predation on turtle eggs. Some of the nests had been freshly uncovered.

In Tide Pole bay on the north west end of Trimouille Island green turtles could be seen stranded at low tide on the muddy bottom.

Vegetation on the island looked relatively healthy considering the time of the year and the lack of late winter rains in the area. Most of the annual herbs had died off on the sandy areas in the middle of the island. A small salt water tidal creek extends south west from Tide Pole bay for approximately 100m. There is an old line of dead mangroves which follows this creek, they have been dead for a long time. However a new line of mangroves has established itself further back from the old line.

On the east side of Trimouille Island green turtle activity seemed heavy on the beaches south of Pitt Point and between Balfour Point and Vodka Beach.

Towards the southern end of Trimouille Island near the navigation beacon there is a half constructed helipad approximately 40m x 30m, the outside wooden frame and weldmesh supports have been constructed but no cement has been layed. The construction has been relatively recent. A smaller and completed helipad exists just south of the larger one which is likely to be used to service the navigation beacon. A Woodside Petroleum communications aerial exists near the same site.

On the 29th October, I visited Alpha Island with the Navy personnell who were going to repair and inspect the warning signs on that island.

There were no signs of recent turtle activity on any of the beaches surrounding Alpha Island.

One small group of Fairy terns were seen on the southern side of Alpha Island. Also observed were Welcome Swallows, a single Pied Cormerant and Silver Gulls on the beaches.

The island is predominantly covered with introduced Kapok bush and buffel grass. In a small cove to the south of the island was a single mangrove, probably Aegialitis annulata, this seemed to be the only mangrove on the island.

There was evidence of recent bird nesting on the island but most old eggs were broken and difficult to identify, they may have been small terns.

The next day, the 30th October, I was dropped off in the northern end of Hermite Island, I walked to Wildwave Lagoon to the west and as far as Mansion Bay to the east.

Again there were no signs of recent turtle activity on the beaches, but a few green turtles were seen swimming through channels around the island.

Welcome Swallows, Oyster Catchers, small waders and Silver Gulls were spread throughout the island and around the many lagoons.

Three vegetation types were observed on Hermite Island. The limestone formations covered most of the island supporting Spinifex triodia and a few small annuals. These areas were very barren with little vegetation of over 0.5m in height. The sandy coastal areas on the west end of the island supported Acacia corriacea, Acacia bivenosa, Spinifex longifolius and sarcostemma. Surrounding the many tidal lagoons and channels were healthy mangrove stands which contained at least three different species.

Saturday the 31st October, we departed the Montebello Islands at 0830 hours and arrived back in Dampier at 1230 hours.

In conclusion I believe Trimouille Island to be a major green turtle rookery and a turtle tagging expedition to that island would be very worthwhile during the mating season.

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