

The Real Estate Crisis on Penguin Island

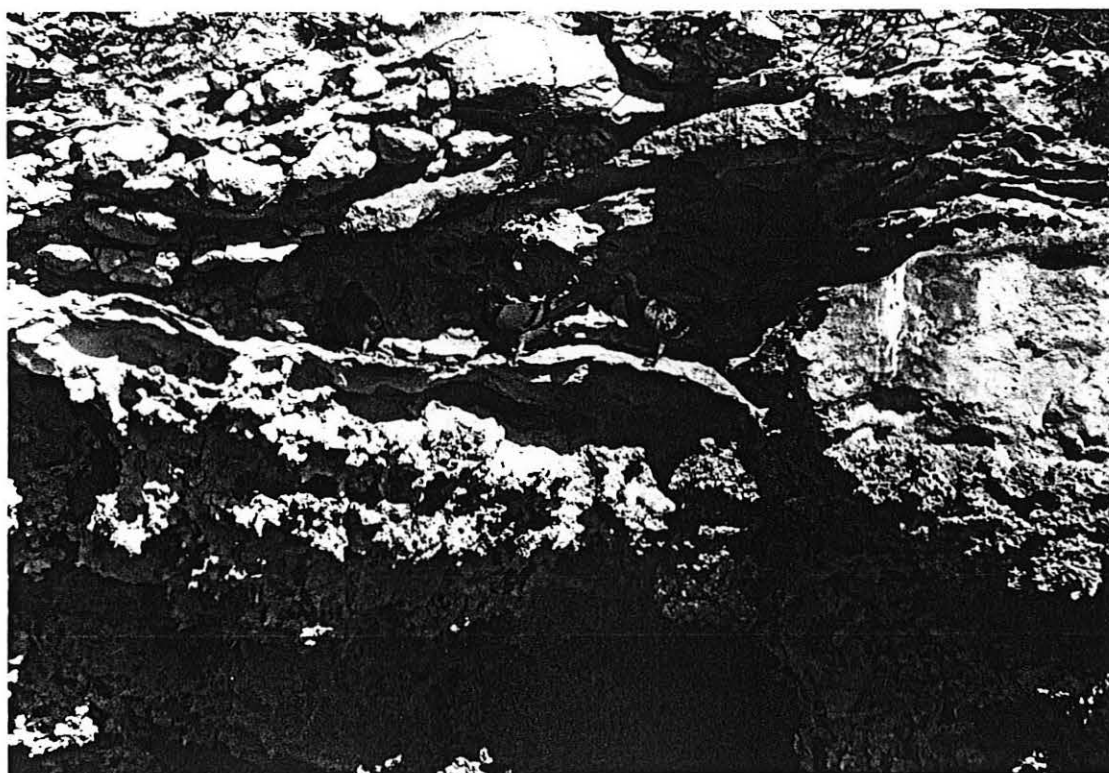
Experienced Bridled Terns usually return to their nest site of previous years, especially if these sites have provided sufficient protection for the egg and nestling. Unlike many other terns which nest in the open, Bridled Terns normally conceal their nests in deep crevices in the limestone or in hollows under dense bushes. Such protected sites increase the chances of successfully rearing young and consequently improve the lifetime output of a breeding pair. The habit of concealing the nest has enabled the Bridled Terns to remain relatively immune to the depredations normally associated with the large numbers of nesting gulls, even in the context of the high levels of human disturbance which Penguin Island experiences.

One pair, well known to island visitors, nests in a cavity in a limestone pillar (solution pipe) near McKenzie's Caves. On many occasions during the summer holiday period, the pair tenaciously defend their nest site whilst surrounded by people sheltering in the caves, sunning on beach towels or involved in the general mayhem of a day by the seaside. Yet at least one member of this pair, colour banded in 1987/88, has returned this season for a sixth year at the old address. A fledgling was probably produced in three of those six years.



[061-65625] *Six years at the old address!*

The feral pigeon has emerged as a much more serious threat to the breeding output of Bridled Terns, than that posed by human disturbance and gulls combined. These descendants of wayward racing pigeons have taken to roosting and nesting on the limestone cliffs and talus slopes of the Shoalwater Bay Islands and their numbers have increased dramatically over the last decade. Like Bridled Terns, feral pigeons prefer to roost and nest in concealed crevices, portals and caves in the limestone. Being heavier than Bridled Terns, and present throughout the year rather than seasonally, feral pigeons have usurped tern nest sites within the limestone habitats.



Feral pigeons on the limestone cliffs of Penguin Island

The limestone habitats are the oldest parts of the Bridled Tern colony. Other areas on the northern and southern plateaux were occupied later and the tombolo area is currently being colonised by an expanding population. A high proportion of the Bridled Terns in the limestone areas are experienced birds that probably produce a disproportionate number of the annual crop of young. The limestone areas are if you like "the inner city zone" with the highest land (nest site) values. The tombolo by contrast is the "mortgage belt" occupied primarily by younger, inexperienced birds unable to procure sites in the more established areas.

Since the feral pigeons (foreign big business) muscled in on the inner city, a number of experienced Bridled Terns have found themselves "on the street". In November 1993 at least two Bridled Terns banded as breeders in 1987/88 season, and known to have sites in deep crevices at that time, were observed nesting in open, exposed locations. In such situations breeding failure, due to human interference and/or gull predation, is almost certain.



Experienced Bridled Tern nesting in the open