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## THE RED-TAILED TROPIC-BIRDS OF SUGARLOAF ROCK

Late in November, 1939, some visitors enjoying an afternoon at the beach near Busseton jetty noticed a strange bird flying overhead. It seemed somewhat larger than the familiar Silver Gulls and Crested Terns. It had a conspicuous coral-red beak and behind it trailed something streamer-like which suggested the bird might have broken free after having been snagged on a fishing-line. Only an experienced bird-watcher would have recognized the stranger as a Red-tailed Tropic-bird—particularly as this bird visits the coast only rarely, and was believed at that time to range no further south than Rottneest Island.

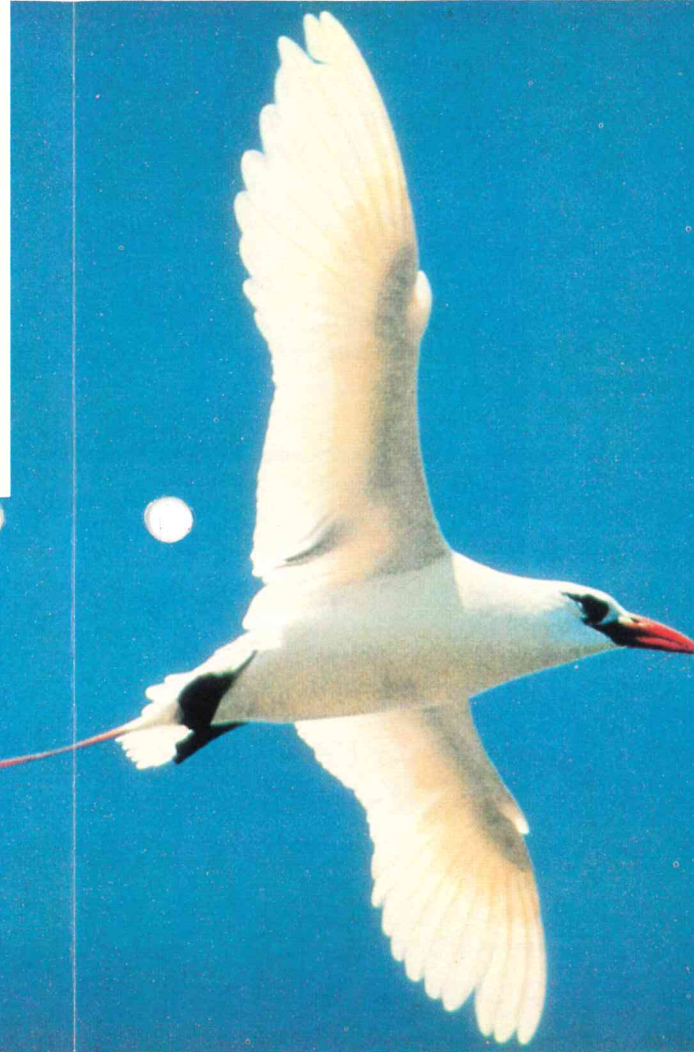
That sighting would probably have been forgotten had it not been followed in the December by an unusual discovery. A beautiful

white bird with a brilliant red beak, a glowing pale-pink satiny mantle and two extraordinary long red streamer-like tail feathers was found sitting under the shelter of a small washed-up log on the beach about a kilometre south of the jetty. The bird seemed reluctant to move, and it was thought to be injured. Closer examination, however, showed that it was covering an egg.

A chain of events followed which resulted in the bird and its egg reaching the Western Australian Museum, where its identity was confirmed.

The occurrence of a Red-tailed Tropic-bird so far south was considered to be quite unusual. That it should have attempted to nest at such an exposed mainland site, so far





### THE RED-TAILED TROPIC-BIRDS

Upper left and upper right: In flight.

Above: 'Back-flapping'. Right: On the nest.

from other known nesting-sites of this species, seemed quite unexplainable. But a succession of data and sightings recorded by several observers over the next 25 years culminated, in 1964, in the discovery of the sun-dried remains of a dead tropic-bird on the mainland coast opposite Sugarloaf Rock, south of Cape Naturaliste. This discovery hastened a solution of the mystery. It was suggested, and later proved by investigations, that Red-tailed Tropic-birds nest on Sugarloaf Rock.

It is not surprising that the discovery of this nesting-site should have eluded bird-watchers until very recent times. Except when nesting, tropic-birds spend most of their lives at sea, well away from coastal areas. They are powerful flyers, catching flying-fish, gar-fish, sardines, Scaly Mackerel and squid in the open seas. The food is captured by diving into the water from heights of up to 14 metres. Tropic-birds are not equipped for life on land; their feet and legs do not allow them to stand or walk. This means that at nesting-time a tropic-bird is unable to move far from the spot where it lands, so it must descend almost at the spot chosen for the nest. A very shallow depression in the sand, or sometimes bare rock, forms the nest.

Sugarloaf Rock is a spectacular pile of granite over 50 metres tall and about one hectare in area. It is separated from the mainland by a channel some 50 metres wide. The site is about three kilometres south of Cape Naturaliste and less than 40 kilometres from the beach at Busselton where the nesting bird was discovered in 1939. Only a portion of the island's surface is covered by vegetation, and the tropic-birds have to compete with Silver Gulls for nesting-sites. Occasionally tropic-birds attempt to brood their eggs on the mainland, but the danger of being disturbed or being attacked by predators seems to have prevented these attempts from succeeding.

Red-tailed Tropic-birds range from the western Indian Ocean to Hawaii in the Pacific. They are solitary offshore birds which form loose communities at nesting-time.



Before nesting begins, the birds perform aerial courtship displays in which gliding, tail-wagging and almost-stationary 'back-flapping' flight are conspicuous. Their calls to one another have been described as squarking, crackling and purring, and are accompanied at the nest-site by signals which help pairs to recognize each other.

Because nesting-space is shared with Silver Gulls, which are notorious egg-thieves and chick-stealers, a parent tropic-bird must always remain on watch until the chick has grown to the stage where it can protect itself. The single egg takes about 45 days to hatch, and a further 68 or 69 days must pass before the young bird is fledged. Breeding activity on the rock extends over six months or more. The parent birds take it in turns to incubate the egg. While one broods and protects it, the other flies off to the sea to fish, probably remaining away for several days.

At 1 030 kilometres south of the Tropic of Capricorn, Sugarloaf Rock is the most southerly recorded breeding-site of the Red-tailed Tropic-bird. This alone makes the area of great interest to bird-observers. Then, too, the rock lies off a National Park which includes the ridge of Cape Naturaliste itself.

For those who are interested in our historical heritage this coastline has a special appeal. French Post-captain Nicolas Baudin visited the area in 1801 and 1802 with his two corvettes, *Geographe* and *Naturaliste*. The scientists of the expedition went ashore in longboats and dinghies. Not far from the cape, one of the longboats was stranded and in an accident that followed attempts to retrieve it a boatman named Vasse was drowned. These events are remembered today in names which have become well known on our coastline.

The rugged shoreline of this area contains magnificent scenery, and from it may at times be seen great schools of dolphins playing in the rolling swells. They will drift in towards the rocks and suddenly, one after another, spring clear of the breaking wave crests in a striking display of gymnastics.

Every year thousands of tourists visit the mainland close to Sugarloaf Rock, over a sealed road which gives easy access. These

people can appreciate at close hand a truly magnificent and almost undisturbed flora which, though restricted in height by strong winds and salt spray, produces a quite spectacular range of blossom in season. The National Park is a treasure-chest of nature, and even experienced bird-watchers may be surprised to know that, in the 1930s, mallee fowl tended their nesting mounds only a few kilometres from the rock. Perhaps some may still exist in the area, or, if they do not, could be re-established in the National Park.

It is likely that the flow of tourists to these parts will increase as the years go by. The tropic-birds' colony at Sugarloaf Rock become more widely known, but its security will be at risk, as the birds can so easily be disturbed. The Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, which has the authority to protect and manage our wildlife resources, is well aware of present and future problems. Its rangers visit the area regularly, and a large, conspicuous notice at the car park supplies information and an appeal to visitors for their co-operation.

Should you ever be able to share the enjoyment of a visit to Sugarloaf Rock, you will

undoubtedly be influenced by its atmosphere and absorb an awareness of the responsibilities which such a fragile national heritage brings to you as a citizen.

*A very noticeable yellow box nearby contains a rescue-line. It is an ominous reminder that many others since Vasse have been swept away by the waves and drowned along this coast. Enjoy its attractions, but respect its dangers.*