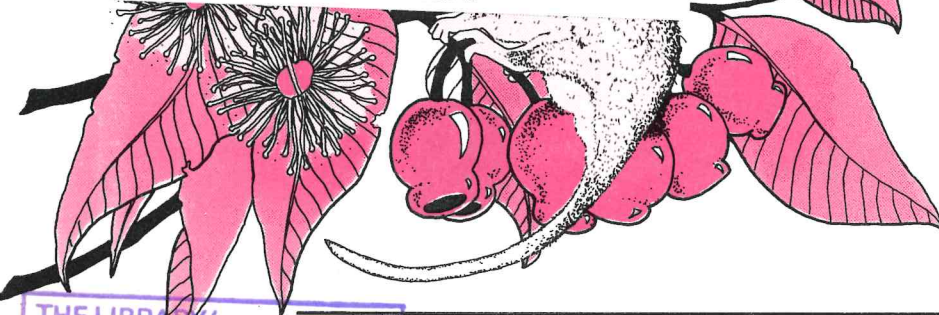




Resource Notes

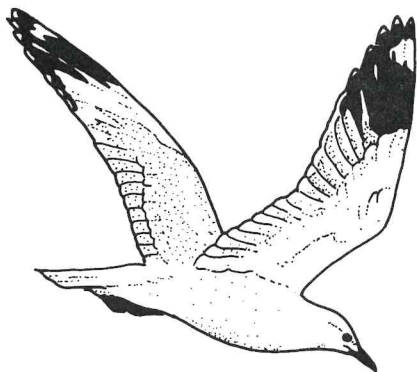
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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SEABIRD ISLANDS



A seabird is a species that relies on the ocean for its food. Well known examples include gulls, terns, some species of cormorants (or shags), albatrosses, pelicans, penguins and shearwaters (sometimes called mutton-birds). Other birds that can be included are the Osprey and Sea-Eagles. There are about 30 species of seabirds that occur around the coasts of Western Australia. Many of these have very big populations; some are quite rare.

Islands are very important to seabirds. Some favoured islands support huge colonies of up to many thousand breeding pairs.

Most seabirds nest on or under the ground. Terns merely deposit their eggs on the ground, often with no added nesting material. Common Noddies build flat, open nests on the ground or on low bushes. Little Penguins, shearwaters and petrels dig

a burrow, usually 0.5 to 1 m long. The nesting burrows of the Wedge-tailed Shearwater can be seen at West End, Rottnest and many other islands. The Lesser Noddy, one of the rarest seabirds, builds a flat-topped nest from seaweed draped precariously on a mangrove branch.

Since most seabirds nest on the ground they are highly susceptible to predation. Islands provide protection from predators that occur on the mainland, and which cannot survive on small islands where there is insufficient space and food year round. The introduction of predators to islands can have a devastating effect. Foxes, cats, dogs and rats eat adults, eggs and chicks while rabbits disturb nesting burrows and kill the vegetation that provides shade and binds the soil.

There are about 3 400 islands and islets around the Western Australian coastline and about 300 of these are known to be used by seabirds for nesting. Some islands are particularly important nesting sites, being used by several different species, often at the same time. One of the most important seabird islands in the world is Pelsaert Island in the Southern Group of the Houtman Abrolhos, off Geraldton. Eighteen species totalling over 200 000 pairs of breeding birds, have been recorded nesting there.



Islands are also a good place to nest because they are close to the food supply. Seabirds eat fish, crustacea or small squid; some will eat molluscs and jellyfish. Various methods of catching the prey are employed. Shearwaters, Sooty Terns and noddies snatch their food with their beak as they fly near the ocean's surface; gannets and many terns dive from high in the air, hitting the water with considerable force and catching fish well below the surface; cormorants "duckdive" and swim after their food; pelicans catch fish in their extraordinary bill; and Ospreys grab fish in their talons. Some seabirds prey on other species. Sea-eagles will eat nesting adults and chicks. Gulls are scavengers and will eat almost anything including the eggs and chicks of other species.

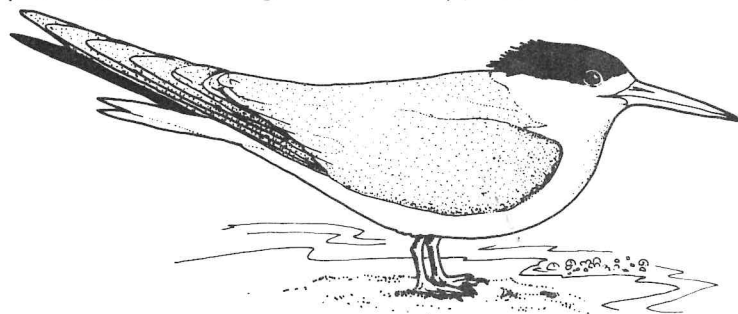
Seabirds spend a long time at sea feeding; many seldom come to land except to breed. Breeding birds feed their young by regurgitation.

Unfortunately, people can interfere with seabird nesting colonies. Unthinking disturbance can cause the collapse of burrows, allow gulls to eat eggs or kill chicks while the parents are frightened away, or lead

to the parent birds abandoning the eggs or young completely. Eggs and chicks are so well camouflaged that people can unknowingly walk on them.

One species that is especially susceptible to disturbance is the Fairy Tern, which nests on beaches, both on islands and, less often, on the mainland. If you walk near a colony the parent birds will swoop, while making loud cheeping calls. They will not sit on the nest while anyone is nearby, so it is important to leave the vicinity immediately. People can also increase the number of natural predators, particularly gulls, by leaving rubbish exposed.

Undisturbed islands are vital to the persistence of seabird populations. The Department of Conservation and Land Management eradicated introduced rats and rabbits from some islands and most island have been declared nature reserves where dogs are banned. Much still needs to be learned about seabirds. You can help by providing information on breeding colonies to the Department of Conservation and Land Management. You can also help conserve seabirds by encouraging people to protect nesting colonies.



This paper was written by Andrew Burbidge and Phillip Fuller, of CALM, who have conducted extensive surveys of seabird populations on islands off the Western Australian coast for more than 25 years.