

Sweet

R E T R E A T



The graceful Red-tailed Tropicbird, rarely seen south of Perth, has carved a precarious niche on a rock 'island' just south of Cape Naturaliste.

Despite its distance from tropical seas, Sugarloaf Rock provides an unlikely oasis and nestsite for the endangered Red-tailed Tropicbird (Phaethon rubricauda), (above).

SUGARLOAF ROCK, adjacent to the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, is so small that only a few pairs of the rare seabird can nest there.

Although surrounded by a protective ocean 'moat', the birds still have to battle with curious humans and hungry predators, such as the ubiquitous silver gull which sometimes steals chicks and eggs.

The birds' hold on their southernmost breeding spot is monitored by CALM officers every year during the nesting season. They record the number of eggs, chicks and their survival rates, and tag the birds. A close eye is also kept on human interference.

These visits are usually made twice each breeding season, despite the difficulties involved in getting to the tiny island.

The small crew must swim about 75 metres, braving treacherous currents in the narrow channel, pushing equipment in a watertight drum. Once at the rock, they



Even barren rocky ground serves as a nestsite for the Tropicbirds (above). A ledge under a rock affords protection for this nesting bird (left).



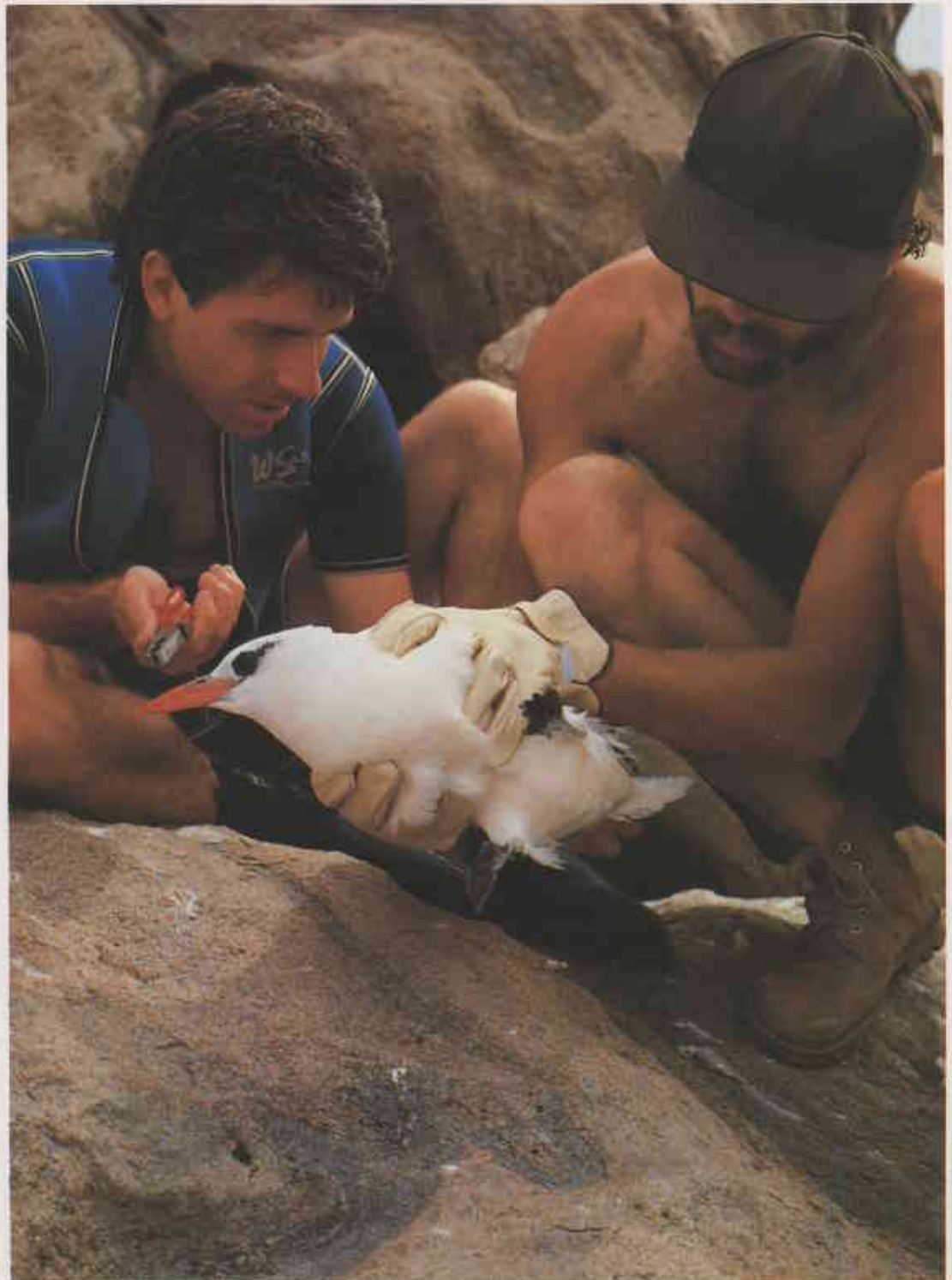
must climb a steep cliff-face to the pinnacle to reach the nest sites.

The Red-tailed Tropicbird has great character; the delicate pink hue of its large, gull-shaped body, bright coral-red bill, and two streamer-like red tail feathers, give it a look of distinction.

Beautiful, rare and endangered, it is found in tropical and sub-tropical seas around northern Australia, Hawaii and

other places. It travels the airwaves of the Indian Ocean to breed on the barren, rocky ledges of this island sanctuary. Sugarloaf Rock is an "A" class nature reserve.

Nests are usually little more than a scrape in the ground or a ledge under a rock. At most, they are ornamented with a few pieces of shrivelled pigface, with perhaps a broken shell or two around the edge. Occasionally, the birds squirm under the few low shrubs clinging to the rock.



CALM Information Officer Kim Williams (left) and Wildlife Officer Mark Barley tag an adult bird. Research activities are kept to a minimum to avoid disturbing the birds.



Adapted to spending most of their lives at sea, the birds struggle to walk or stand on land. This clumsiness makes catching the birds for tagging a simple matter.

Returning to their nest after searching for food is often a hit-or-miss exercise, as they must land very close by. Several landing attempts are sometimes needed when the wind is unfavourable; an entertaining spectacle.

The Red-tailed Tropicbird indulges in an aerial courtship ritual before nesting. Such displays are performed by one to six birds, but usually in pairs. The birds remain almost stationary and swing their tail streamers from side to side as they cackle to one another.

Like many seabirds, Tropicbirds regurgitate (at both ends) when threatened or under stress, which creates many humorous moments for the unwary researcher.

This habit also gives researchers a close look at the bird's diet. Samples of regurgitated food recovered this year differed significantly from that gathered in the past three to four years. Southern sea garfish and blue mackerel, a common schooling fish in Cape Naturaliste waters,

were found most often over that time. This year, a small cuttlefish was the most predominant species recovered.

The number of nesting pairs increased this season compared to the last three to four years and there may be a link between the number of breeding birds, the type of prey available, and the Leeuwin current's influence on water temperature and prey species. However, this is yet to be proved.

It is illegal to disturb the Red-tailed Tropicbird, which is protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act. Human presence disturbs them, so it is best to observe them from the mainland.

Tricky currents around the rock, and its ocean moat, have traditionally given the birds sufficient protection and privacy from humans and mainland animals. But, with mounting pressure for recreational and residential developments in the Dunsborough area and the lure of Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park's scenic coastline, there is a challenge to ensure the reserve remains in its current undisturbed state.

TEXT - Carolyn Thomson and Kim Williams
PHOTOGRAPHY - John Green

This young chick has not yet developed the distinctive red beak of the adult bird (above).

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EDITORIAL

A prerequisite for the successful management of land and wildlife is an understanding of the processes that drive ecosystems, and managers who can manipulate these processes.

In Western Australia, we are fortunate that we have a wealth of talent in different government agencies, tertiary institutions and private companies who can provide these research and management skills.

Of course, obtaining a perfect understanding of ecosystems and ways to manage them brings to mind the frog who wants to reach a creek, but can only jump half the distance every time.

But it is not the complexities of understanding or managing ecosystems which provide the greatest difficulty.

Social and political factors are far more difficult to accommodate.

All the scientific and managerial skills in the world are worth nothing if the community and, often more importantly, selected constituencies within the community do not support the management strategies.

Unfortunately, there is often an inverse relationship between a scientist's or manager's skills in his profession and his capacity to handle social and political factors in the community. This is not surprising, since most scientists and managers have received little training in basic communication skills, let alone community politics.

CALM is attempting to address this problem in a variety of ways. But the people who should know the most about how to obtain community support for public land management strategies are the public. *Landscape* readers are an important and influential constituency. If you have thoughts on this issue we would like to hear from you.



What a sterling idea! A new management plan for CALM's South Coast Region - page 28.



Are insects gradually eating away our jarrah forests? Turn to page 18.



What lies beneath the waters of Marmion Marine Park? See page 25.

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A rose by any other name... Does its name detract from the beauty of the common eggfly (Hypolimnastis bolina)? Photograph - Jiri Lochman

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