

# Michaelmas Island



## King George Sound

Although close to Albany on the south coast of Western Australia, this 90-hectare island set in the crystal clear waters of King George Sound is relatively unexplored. Staff from the Department of Environment and Conservation recently made a visit to the island to improve understanding of its biodiversity values.

by Anne Cochrane, Sarah Comer,  
Peter Collins, Jonathan Pridham and  
Cameron Tiller

**M**ichaelmas Island lies 10 kilometres east-south-east of Albany and 2.2 kilometres offshore. The island was named by George Vancouver on 29 September 1791, Michaelmas Day. This long, narrow strip of land is 1.4 kilometres long by half a kilometre wide, with steep rocky slopes rising from the sea to guard its shores. Geologically, the island consists mainly of granite-gneiss, with extensive capping of aeolianite limestone, particularly on its northern side. There are no broad beaches for landing a boat and access is only possible in calm weather.



The island is thought to be an important breeding site for seabirds such as the little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) and fleshy-footed shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*). For this reason, the island was declared a nature reserve in 1983 and is now managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

Access to the island is difficult and consequently public visitation is low, thereby ensuring minimal disturbance to breeding seabirds.

### Exploring the island

On a calm sunny April day, we motored across Kind George Sound to the island. Fleshy-footed shearwaters were seen in profusion between Gull Rock and Michaelmas, and we also saw a pod of common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*). We landed in a small protected cove on the north-eastern side of the island. The sea surrounding the island was clear and refreshing (determined by a swim at the end of the warm day).

After a scramble up the limestone-encrusted slope, we entered a treed plateau that stretched the length of the island. A walk along this ridge line revealed thick woodland dominated by the ridge-fruited mallee (*Eucalyptus angulosa*). Deep leaf litter carpeted the ground, yet surprisingly little invertebrate life was discovered, despite this spongy layer being quite moist.



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**Main** Rugged foreshore and clear waters of Michaelmas Island.

Photo - Sarah Comer/DEC

**Insert top right** Silvereye.

Photo - Dave Watts/Lochman

Transparencies

**Insert centre** Michaelmas Island.

Photo - Rob Olver

**Top** Michaelmas Island.

Photo - Bill Belson/Lochman

Transparencies

**Above** Bush rat.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

**Right** Singing honeyeater.

Photo - Rob Drummond/Lochman

Transparencies

There was no evidence of recent fire and the vegetation appeared long unburnt. We knew of no written record of fire on the island and the considerable lichen coverings and deep leaf litter attested to the absence of fire for some time, as did the notable size of hakea plants in the middle of the island. A northern running gully at the western end of the island supported large trees of Bald Island marlock (*Eucalyptus cornuta*).

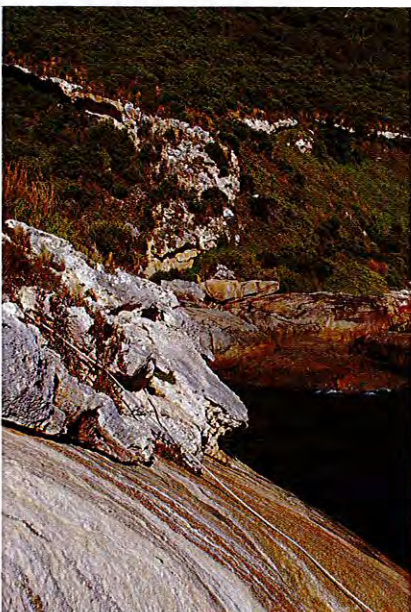
### Views and dives abound

At its western end, the island rises to a granite dome, 152 metres above sea level. From here the views back to the mainland and to adjacent Breaksea Island are glorious. From Mount Manypeaks in the east to Bald Head in the west, the shores of this section of the south coast are dotted with magnificent bays, beaches and headlands. The waters off the eastern and northern parts of Michaelmas Island provide good diving sites and the ex-whale chaser *Cheyne III* was scuttled off the western end of the island in 1982 to provide a dive wreck.

**Above right** King's skink.  
Photo - Jiri Lochman

**Right** A variety of fungi grows on branches of trees.

**Below** Thick bushland and granite formations of Michaelmas Island.  
Photos - Sarah Comer/DEC



Although relatively unscathed by human disturbance, the evidence of rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) was obvious, with diggings and scats seen across the island. A number of weed species were also noted, including scarlet pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) and bridal creeper (*Asparagus asparagoides*), although the incidence of invasive plant species generally appeared minimal.

### Adding to the inventory

In 1975, DEC research scientist Ian Abbott recorded some 80 plant species, although he took specimens from only 24, two of these non-native. One of our aims on this visit was to collect more specimens to provide a comprehensive flora list for this rarely visited island. We collected 30 more native species, one of conservation significance (the fern *Asplenium aethiopicum*) and sighted another 14 plant species that Ian had already collected on his visit 25 years ago. The difference in season of visit may account for the lower numbers of plant species found, with Ian's spring visit more likely to uncover ephemeral annual species.

On the fauna side, a number of small skinks was seen although most proved too fast to capture in the thick leaf litter, the only exception being the skink *Ctenotus labillardieri*. King's skinks (*Egernia kingii*) have been recorded on the island previously, though we saw no signs of these large reptiles. We also saw no signs of seabird burrows, although these have mostly been recorded in the southern parts of the island. A number of skulls of the bush rat (*Rattus fuscipes*) were found, along with a millipede from the genus *Atelomastix* and some land snails from the genus *Bothriembryon*. Birds recorded included the grey fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*), golden whistler (*Pachycephala pectoralis*),

singing honeyeater (*Lichenostomus virescens*), silveryeye (*Zosterops lateralis*) and inland thornbill (*Acanthiza apicalis*). An eagle's nest was sighted high in a Bald Island marlock.

Improving our understanding of the biodiversity values of small islands such as Michaelmas is necessary to assist managers with the long-term conservation of these special places. The survey team plans a longer follow-up visit to the island to collect invertebrates and other leaf litter residents, map weeds and establish survey plots in the long-unburnt vegetation.

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### Publishing credits

**Executive editor** Madeleine Clews.

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**Scientific/technical advice** Kevin Thiele, Paul Jones, Keith Morris, Michael Rule.

**Design and production** Tiffany Taylor, Lauren Tyrrell, Peter Nicolas, Gooitzen van der Meer.

**Illustration** Gooitzen van der Meer.

**Cartography** Promaco Geodraft.

**Marketing** Estelle de San Miguel.

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Phone (08) 9219 8000.

**Prepress and printing** GEON, Western Australia.

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December 2010

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ISSN 0815-4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

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Department of Environment and Conservation

