

LACEPEDE ISLANDS REPORT

In 1801, the captain of a French vessel sailing up the north-west coast of Western Australia named a small group of islands near Broome after the French naturalist Lacepede.

One hundred and sixty-nine years later, two islands in the group, West Island and Middle Island, were set aside as sanctuaries for the conservation of flora and fauna.

In July, 1970, a Departmental patrol vessel, *P.V. Dampier*, crewed by Mr. E. J. Little (skipper) and Fisheries Inspector J. Harman, visited the north-western-most island in the Lacepede group.



Skipper E. J. Little and Inspector J. Harman aboard the "P.V. Dampier"

Mr. Little reported the following observations during their inspection:—

"On the first day a low tide allowed us to concentrate mainly on the shallows and reefs on the south side of the island. We observed an abundance of Green Turtles, many of which were trapped in shallow holes on the dry reef. We had previously observed dozens of turtles in the shallows off the edge of the reef. Also worthy of note were the numerous large clams, some of which measured 30 inches across.

As the tide rose we made our way ashore and headed toward an abandoned campsite. While walking in the direction of the camp we were impressed by an amazing sight. There were, conservatively speaking, thousands of nesting Brown Gannets, which we subsequently learned, use the island as a breeding site. The young, covered in white down, were taller than their parents and as we walked through them they barely parted—in fact many stood their ground and squawked disapproval.

The immature birds were in various stages of development; some almost ready to fly; some with only tail and wing feathers; others a ball of white fluff and some newly hatched and without a single feather. Inspector Harman saw an albino Gannet—the bird was ready to fly, complete with all feathers.

The nests were shallow depressions in the ground and some were covered with seaweed and small sticks. Most nests had two eggs in them. During our inspection of the young and the nests, hundreds of adult Gannets wheeled overhead and, needless to say, we caught a fair amount of their "bombardment".

Man has left his mark on the island. At the abandoned campsite we found a quantity of tinned and packaged food left in the tent, together with bedding and cooking utensils. Outside the tent, tin cans, cartons and similar debris was strewn around. On the northern side of the island, about 400 yards from the camp, we found four 44-gallon drums of petrol and more food supplies. There was also an 80 foot wireless mast near the camp.

The following day Inspector Harman and I carried out a survey of the island. As mentioned, we found Brown Gannets nesting everywhere. We also located a colony of 1,000 to 2,000 nesting Lesser Frigate Birds. Their nests were built on small bushes about 12 inches high and the young were in various stages of development. These immature birds, colourful with their scrawny necks and hooked



A colony of nesting Lesser Frigate Birds

beaks, resembled vultures perched on their nests. As we walked through the colony some of the birds clicked their beaks to show their disapproval of our intrusion.

On one of the beaches we observed a large flock of Fairy Terns but there was no sign of nesting.

Other birds observed were: Sooty Oyster Catcher, Dotterel, Blue Reef Heron, Large Pied Cormorant, Small Black Cormorant and Silver Gull.

Before we went to the island we were told that large numbers of rats have been seen on the beaches after turtle eggs. We did not actually see any rats on the beaches, or elsewhere, but there was evidence of their presence around the campsite.

Finally, worthy of note, was a port-type structure which we believe was used by guano diggers."

[According to Serventy and Whittell ("Birds of Western Australia") the Brown Gannet was the main guano producer of the former extensive deposits on the Lacepede Islands. Exploitation of the deposits began without the cognisance of the colony administrators until 1876. By 1879, about 37,000 tons of guano had been raised and the deposits were virtually exhausted.]

SUGGESTED READING

Several of our readers have requested that a list of suggested reading on wildlife and the environment be included in each edition of S.W.A.N.S.

In future issues we will publish a list of book titles, journals, etc., on topics covering plants, animals and the environment.

The titles suggested will, in most cases, be for the amateur or untrained person seeking a better understanding of our wildlife and its ecology.

BIRDS

"Birds of Western Australia"—Serventy, D. L. and Whittell, H. M.

"A Field Guide to Australian Birds"—Slater, P.

MAMMALS

"A Guide to the Native Mammals of Australia"—Ride, W. D. L.

"Furred Animals of Australia"—Troughton, E.

ENVIRONMENT

"A Continent in Danger"—Serventy, Vincent.

"Between Wodjil and Tor"—Main, Barbara York.

MISCELLANEOUS

"The Western Australian Naturalist"—Journal of the Western Australian Naturalists Club, Naturalists Hall, 63-65 Meriwa Street, Nedlands.

"Wildlife in Australia"—Journal of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, Subscription \$1.60 W.P.S.Q. Box 2030, G.P.O. Brisbane, Qld. 4001.