

BREEDING OF PELICANS IN PEEL INLET

On Sunday the 7th July, 1974, Dr D. L. Serventy in the company of Prof. C. G. Sibley and party discovered a new nesting station of Pelicans in Peel Inlet.

A boat cruise around the sand banks at the mouth of the Murray River revealed Pelicans on a bank which was created with the dredging of the Yunderup Canals Project. A closer observation showed that these birds were actually nesting on a site which was on the lee of the unvegetated island, facing east. There were two groups of nests, the first having the following frequency of eggs:—

1 egg — 3 nests
2 eggs — 41 nests
3 eggs — 3 nests

The second, a little to the north and evidently a slightly later nesting:—

1 egg — 25 nests
2 eggs — 15 nests
3 eggs — 1 nest

In addition to the nests there were 83 eggs scattered about just above the strandline. As far as could be ascertained all were cold with one or two accidentally broken and quite fresh.

The birds sat close, but as the party landed, they waddled off the nests and swam in a flock close by. The party embarked after 5 minutes on the islet and the incubating birds returned immediately to their nests. Only a few silver gulls were on the islet and they appeared to be ineffective predators, as none attacked the unguarded eggs.

Following the discovery, the Chief Warden of Fauna requested an inspection of the area and other known nesting sites in the Inlet.

On Thursday, 25th July, 1974, Warden David Mell, Inspector Smith and Asst. Inspector Johnson proceeded in the Department's runabout to the island.

As they approached the island a group of black cormorants and silver gulls departed.

There were approximately ninety pelicans on the island; most flew off, but some swam a short distance then took to the air. Only one bird remained on the

water not far away. At first glance it was obvious the nesting colony was not successful. Two complete nests were located on the east side of the island, one with a single warm egg, the other empty. A collection of weed was scattered along the shore on the south-east side, looking very much like nesting material from destroyed nests.

There was a total of twenty eggs scattered around the eastern side of the island, and, apart from the eggs being incubated, they were cold. Some were white and appeared quite fresh, the others were stained and looked as though they had been incubated for 2 or 3 weeks, but were now quite deserted.

No evidence could be located to suggest the reason for the destruction of the nesting colony. The large volume of water entering the inlet from the Murray River this year had decreased the size of the island since Inspector Smith had last seen it.

It was also noted that the public had easy access to the island using small boats.

After the inspection of the island the officers departed and watched as the only remaining pelican returned to the island and its nest. Soon after several others returned to settle on the island.

From here Warden Mell proceeded south to Boggy Bay but could not locate last year's nesting island, as it was under water. The small island south of Yunderup that is believed to have had a pelican colony some time ago, was also under water.

Pelicans normally nest only once a year, but in the following August when Dr Serventy visited the Yunderup Island again, he found to his delight, that the Pelicans had nested a second time.

This time they had placed their nests high and dry on the islands peak.

On approach the adult birds formed a circle around a creche of about 30 downy chicks. Other recently hatched chicks, too young to join the others, huddled beneath their parents.

The island sands were also showing signs of ecological succession, with the appearance of new vegetation.

Future patrols by vehicle and boat will be conducted in an attempt to discover new nesting colonies and protect those already established.



Pelicans and nests at the peak of the island.



Creche of downy Pelican chicks.