

## Bird Notes from Walpole Island

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The following facts were communicated to the writer by Mr. T. G. Bryant, a Warrnambool resident, who formerly spent some years on Walpole Island. This tiny speck of land contains an area of only 320 acres, and its nearest neighbour is New Caledonia, some 150 miles to the north-west. A coral island, overlaid with phosphate deposits, it is nevertheless very precipitous, rising, as it does, 300 feet sheer from the Pacific Ocean. The island must have suffered a long, slow process of immersion, while the coral polyps worked away quietly below the surface. A succeeding process of elevation, possibly gradual, possibly sudden, has raised the island to its present position. The vegetation consists mainly of stunted undergrowth, but the banyan, the custard-apple, and a species of palm are also represented. The following observations were made between 1920 and 1923, and though few in number, may not prove altogether devoid of interest.

Firstly, a word as regards some absentees. No petrels nested on the island, nor were albatrosses, cormorants, or gulls ever observed in the vicinity.

1. An occasional visitor was a large dark-coloured Pigeon, a resident of New Caledonia. It was seen on the island five or six times only.

2. The Frigate-Birds (*Fregata* sp.) came back each breeding season in the wake of the Tropic-Birds. They appeared to live mainly as robbers, stealing fish from the Tropic-Birds, especially the Red-tailed species, which was slower on the wing than its White-tailed relative. The flight of the Frigate-Bird was marvellous to watch. The bird would forge ahead against a strong wind, without any perceptible movement of the mighty wings. From Mr. Bryant's description, I think the species at Walpole Island was the Greater Frigate-Bird (*Fregata minor*).

3. Two kinds of Gannets (*Sula* sp.) nested on the island, and were practically the only permanent residents among the avifauna of this isolated spot.

4. The Red-tailed Tropic-Bird (*Phaethon rubricaudus*) and the White-tailed Tropic-Bird (*P. lepturus*) were seen during the breeding season only. Only a few hundreds of the latter species came in, but the numbers of the Red-tailed Tropic-Bird would run to several thousands. These nested on top of the island, but the White-tailed species, much more wary, nested in the crevices in the sides of the cliffs.

5. Noddies (*Anous sp.*) arrived each year, and would be first seen as black clumps out on the sea. The following day, they would come in and commence nesting operations in the bunchy tops of the palm-trees.

6. Of the migratory Waders, only one species was seen. It nested at the same time as the other birds, i.e., during June, July and August. The nests were not *made*, but rather *selected* by the birds, being merely small depressions in the coral, covered with a low growth of "hogweed." As to a description of the eggs and the size of the clutch, my informant cannot give accurate details, owing to the fact that at the time he was not deeply interested in the study of bird-life. But he says that there is no doubt at all about the birds breeding there. They were quite tame, and would bring the young over on to the guano drying-grounds, where they were easily observed.

And now, what *was* this Wader? My informant says it was the "Jack Snipe," the same bird that he has shot on Victorian swamps. From the illustrations in Dr. Leach's *Australian Bird Book*, Mr. Bryant identifies it as the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Erolia acuminata*). Only a few hundreds of these birds nested on Walpole Island, and no observations were made as to the direction of flight, either on their arrival or on their departure. Could they have been portion of the New Zealand contingent of the Waders, a portion that, maybe, does *not* regularly repair to the Siberian tundras to breed? I leave this for other observers to discover. Specimens sent from Walpole Island for identification would help to settle a rather intriguing question.

7. Occasionally a Hawk, similar to our Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*) would arrive and remain on the island a week or two, living meanwhile on the rats, which were quite numerous.

8. Once, during the hurricane season (January to March), a small flock of (?) Diamond Firetails (*Zonaginus guttatus*) landed on the island, but did not stay very long. I am not certain of this identification. Mr. Bryant describes it as the "Java Sparrow," the same bird that he knew on the Murchison River, W.A.

9. On one occasion, a Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) arrived in an exhausted condition. It was picked up and was given water, of which it drank freely. It soon revived and flew off into the scrub, but was not seen again. On another occasion, a flock of about twenty arrived, tired but not exhausted. They stayed four or five days before departing.

9. To complete this short list, I must step outside the Class AVES, and mention two Flying Foxes (fruit-eating bats), which, for a short time, stayed on the island and then left, without announcing whence they had come or whither they were going. They are very numerous in New Caledonia.