

Mud Island Re-visited

By JOHN REED, Melbourne, Victoria.

On Easter Saturday, April 20, 1946, Mud Island, Port Phillip Bay, looked as good as it ever had. Smooth water, signs of the sun breaking through thin clouds, and a low tide, all combined to make conditions ideal. A windy day is mostly a wasted day on the island: it means an hour's rough trip across, a difficult landing over the tricky sand bars, and a restless lot of birds when one arrives there. And a high tide means inaccessible birds and thigh-deep wading across channels.

But this day was perfect, and it needed to be, as we had tried in vain for three years to make the trip, and, when we finally managed it, had to pay heavily. In the old days any fisherman from Queenscliff or Sorrento would take one there, but things are different now, and the big money the boats are earning makes their owners reluctant to waste a day at the island. Two hours outside the Heads will frequently net £6 to £8 from a catch of barracouta. In the winter, of course, things are not so good, but then neither is Mud Island, unless you are very lucky.

Our landing on this occasion was welcomed by a small group of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Erolia acuminata*)—some 20 or 30 birds—which, most unusually, seemed undisturbed by the dinghy and by our own noisy movements as we clambered ashore, and they waited quietly as we walked slowly towards them over the exposed sand bar. Though most of the birds were in the usual winter plumage, I was particularly pleased to see about six in varying degrees of their russet breeding plumage—the first I remember seeing. The one or two in which the plumage was apparently 'full' were very bright, suffused with the rusty colour so common to the wader species. With the Stints were several Crested or Bass Straits Terns (*Sterna bergii*) and overhead flew two Fairy Terns (*Sterna nereis*).

Further down the island, on the main flat, were more Sharp-tails—perhaps 100 in all—a sprinkling of Little Stints (*Erolia ruficollis*), and up to a dozen Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) in scattered groups, whilst on the edge of the water stood the warier Curlews (*Numenius cyanopus*) (15), Pied Oyster-catchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*) (15), and a single Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*). Taken altogether, I think this was probably the smallest collection of waders I have ever known on the island, including mid-winter visits; but the day was to have its special excitement—even better than the russet-coloured Stints.

We had nearly completed the circle of the island, and my wife and I were on the last of the exposed flats when I noticed an unusual-looking dotterel, and then three or four more, scattered over a fair area. In size and general build the birds resembled the Double-banded Dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*), but the colour markings were quite different, though varying on the several birds seen. On the best of them the red (or russet — though I think lighter and brighter than the Stints) spread from the top of the head down to the upper back, around the neck (leaving the throat pure white), over the breast and well down on to the abdomen, whilst through the eye ran a strong and very conspicuous and heavy black line, the forehead being black with a smallish white spot (as in the male Flame Robin). The remainder of the upper surface was the usual, somewhat-mottled brown-grey, but in flight the base of the tail appeared to be paler and it was possibly tipped with black. The legs were dark, but the actual colour was uncertain.

These birds, perhaps eight in all, were watched for quite a time as they fed over the mud, never in a compact group, but always scattered, though keeping roughly in the same area and coming sometimes within about 40 yards of us. At first I did not connect them with the Mongolian Sand-Dotterel (*Charadrius mongolus*), a species that I had seen once before on the island — their colouring was so much more intensive and I did not remember the eye stripes being so pronounced — but reference to Mathews' *Birds of Australia* leaves no doubt, though, here again, the bird he figures is not nearly so brightly or extensively coloured as the best of those we saw.

As usual, the Swamp-Harrier (*Circus approximans*) swept slowly over the samphire and White-fronted Herons (*Notophojæ novæ-hollandiæ*) stood in the shallows. Cormorants splashed away in the distance, but the Swan population was reduced to about four birds, keeping well out of the way on the central lagoon.

Though I have no direct evidence of it, I suspect that shooting still takes place on the island. A dead Swan and Cormorant suggested this, while almost any fisherman will talk of the shooting to be had there. It seems to be tacitly assumed that if you wish to go to the island it is for the purpose of shooting 'duck, curlews and snipe'. We were told that a rabbit recently went across for two nights and obtained about 70 pairs, which is probably no exaggeration, as there used to be numbers about; whereas on this trip we only saw scratchings in a few places.

As a memento of our day we brought back two almost perfect paper nautilus shells.