



THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MONTAGU ISLAND

The earliest recorded ornithological visit to Montagu Island was in September 1907 by Arthur Francis Basset Hull. There are few documented observations about the island before this date. However, its natural resources had long been recognized by the local aboriginal communities.

Cook in April 1770 took it to be a headland off the coast below Mt Dromedary. It was named Montagu Island in 1790 by Captain Anstis of the convict transport vessel 'Surprise'. George Bass passed inshore of the island in 1797 without special comment and Mathew Flinders sailed close by to seawards in February 1798. The brief observations by Flinders are the first documented descriptions about the island. He noted that there were a few small trees and many seals in the surrounding waters. Doubtless sealers soon plundered the area but no information about that particular period in the island's history seems to exist.

Records start with the building of a lighthouse and the associated residences in 1878 with a formal commissioning and occupation late in 1881. Little, however, can be gleaned concerning the island's fauna and flora from the available records until that first visit by Basset Hull.

Basset Hull's main purpose for visiting the island was to further his studies of Silver Gull colonies in NSW. He tragically lost all of his collection of eggs and his photographic plates when the boat he was in capsized on returning to Narooma. Fortunately there was no loss of life and, undaunted, he went back to the island in October 1911 to make further collections of gulls' eggs, take several photographs of the Silver Gull colonies and record some details about the vegetation and wildlife he observed on the island.

Little was added to our knowledge of the natural resources of Montagu over the next fifty years. Occasional visits by staff from the Australian Museum are recorded in the Museum catalogues of acquisitions and photographs but very little was ever written about the natural history of the island.

In the 1920s F.A. Rodway took an interest in the vegetation of the island and collected some of the first botanical specimens and a little later in the 1920s I.A. Brown made some observations on the geology of the island.

It was not until the late 1950s that we begin to have a better record of the natural resources of the island. This started with the banding of large numbers of Silver Gulls *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae* and Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii* by Robert Carrick and his team of co-workers from CSIRO. Many gulls and terns were marked as part of a wider investigation of dispersal and survival of these species in south-eastern Australia. Also at this time, Stephen Davies, while on the island, investigated the way that adult Crested Terns could recognize their own chicks by their unique calls. These were pioneering studies employing newly available techniques of tape recording sounds in the field and the visualization and analysis of these recorded sounds using the recently developing methods of sound-spectrography (he used an instrument called a Sonagraph). Regrettably few additional observations were made during these annual gull and tern banding trips until in 1960 Norman Robinson decided to have a look at the shearwaters breeding on the island.



Basset Hull had recorded that the Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* was present, and presumably bred, but Robinson discovered that Short-tailed Shearwaters *Ardenna tenuirostris* and a few Sooty Shearwaters *Ardenna grisea* also occurred on the island. This followed up on the discovery a year before that the Short-tailed Shearwater did in fact breed on islands in NSW waters – previously it was thought to be confined as a breeding species to islands in Bass Strait, Tasmania and Spencer Gulf. Robinson was also interested in bird vocalizations and he made sound recordings of the shearwaters. Revelation that more than one species of shearwater was present and breeding on Montagu Island initiated a long term study that has continued annually up to the present day.

ANNIVERSARY FACT SHEETS NATURAL HISTORY

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF MONTAGUE ISLAND SHEARWATER RESEARCH 2009

Keith Hindwood prepared and published in 1969 the first inventory of all bird records from Montagu Island and M.E. Sullivan prepared a report in 1975 on the archaeology of the island. An account on the seals was published by Peter Shaughnessy and others in 2001. Reports have now been published following each shearwater survey. These appear in the pages of *Nature in Eurobodalla*, an annual publication of the local Eurobodalla Natural History Society. Much additional information about the natural resources of Montagu Island will be found in the pages of this journal.

Following the decommissioning of the manned light station in the late 1980s and the dedication of the island as a nature reserve several studies on the fauna and flora have been undertaken by students from Sturt University. This work has been done under the guidance of Prof. Nick Klomp. Lately, various additional studies by MIPartners on the status of landbirds on Montagu are being carried out with a view to tracking long term changes resulting from suppression of invasive weeds and a vigorous program aimed at revegetating the island in a way that will restore a landscape nearer to that likely to have been present 200 years ago.



Further Reading

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