

FAIRY TERNS ON ROTTNEST ISLAND

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The following notes have been made over the last three years and, as the visits only occupied a few days, no complete picture of the nesting of the Fairy Tern (*Sterna nereis*) is offered.

1947.

On February 5 of this year 38 Fairy Terns were seen on a small projection into Government House Lake from the north shore. Many scrapes were found and several nests containing one egg. These were very close to the edge of the salt lake. My brother (D.L.S.) found nesting in progress here on January 8—six nests with single eggs and several empty scrapes. At the same time there was another colony of about 40 nests, somewhat more advanced, at the opposite side of Government House Lake near the salt works, but it was despoiled by boys.

On March 2 the birds had finished incubating the eggs but two young unable to fly were found on the end of the spit. One young bird "froze" when I approached but as soon as I retired, ran to the water's edge and escaped by swimming to the opposite side of the lake. The adults attacked vigorously, far more so than when incubating. It was here that I had my first experience of the method of attack by defaecating over an intruder. On no occasion did the diving birds actually strike me with wings or beak.

1949.

The nesting colony was found on a narrow bank cutting the southern end of Lake Bagdad from the northern. During the winter this bank is covered with water but it emerges again during the summer.

The following figures indicate the progress of nesting in the colony:—

Date	1 egg	2 eggs	1 chick	1 egg + 1 chick	2 chicks	Total
January 15 ...	52	11	1	1	—	65
„ 19 ...	51	10	4	3	1	69
„ 20 ...	48	10	6	2	1	67
„ 24 ...	47	9	4	—	—	60

Unfortunately it was not possible to trace the ultimate fate of the colony. The area in which nesting took place was often visited by holiday makers and although most took care not to harm the birds, accidents were always possible.

The birds attacked vigorously throughout each visit. The camera and tripod placed near the nests were particularly singled out for attack. The lenses were continually being hit and the taking of pictures of the nesting birds was something of a problem. In one case a pair of birds kept attacking the camera for over an hour but interestingly enough they were not the birds nesting near-

est to it. The other birds returned fairly readily to their nests. Other birds coming near the colony were attacked. A Mountain Duck (*Tadorna tadornoides*) which swam too close was driven off. Another interesting point is that although the number of nests with one egg is decreasing in the preceding list, new nests were actually being added each day.

1950.

Again the visit was a hurried one and the figures given are for one day only, on January 30.

118	nests	with	1	egg.
28	"	"	2	eggs.
64	"	"	1	chick.
6	"	"	1	egg + 1 chick.
4	"	"	2	chicks.
14	with	1	large	chick.

This makes a total of 234 nests and therefore 468 adult birds. It is also an interesting confirmation of the value of estimating the size of bird flocks, since my estimate before counting had begun was 500 birds. Of course an accuracy as high as this cannot always be expected.

The colony this time was nesting on a small island in Lake Bagdad a few hundred yards to the westward of the previous year. The island could only be reached by wading and in some parts the lack of a firm bottom produced a quicksand effect, which would deter most visitors. Possibly this was the reason for the large congregation of birds. It is possible that the sight of terns nesting stimulates others to begin. The casualties are then balanced by the influx of new pairs. However if casualties are low the colony may assume a larger size with a consequently greater stimulation to incoming pairs. This is purely surmise on my part but undoubtedly this is the biggest colony of Fairy Terns I have ever seen on Rottnest or for that matter on any of the islands on the west coast.

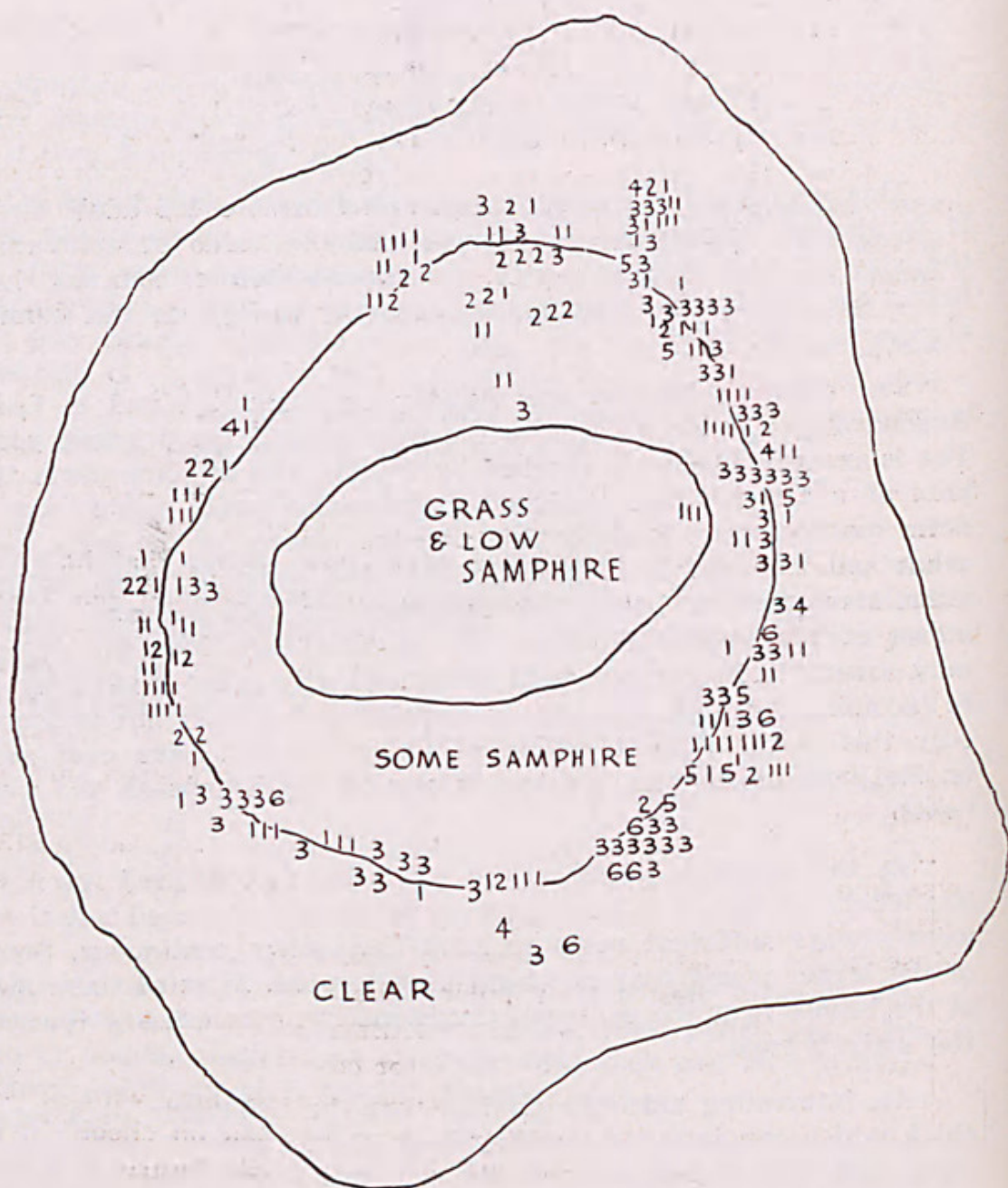
As the diagram indicates, the whole island was used for nesting. There appeared to be groups more thickly clustered but there were always sufficient nests to keep the colony continuous. Some of the larger young may not have been located. Most of them hide in the bushes near the centre of the island but others hurry towards the water's edge.

An interesting sidelight on this was the behaviour of a large chick which ran towards a sitting bird. It was pecked quite vigorously and then turned towards the water. An adult landed nearby and seizing it by the neck tweaked it savagely. The chick squatted. The adult pecked at its rear and then flew off. A few minutes later the chick raised its head and peered around. Finally it ran a few yards towards the water. An adult again pecked at it from the air and the chick again froze. A few minutes later the performance

was once more repeated. This seems to indicate a preference for the water on the part of the chicks. However this may be conditioned by the age of the youngster.

From the diagram it is obvious that there is a grouping of small colonies in the larger. Chicks are concentrated at the eastern and southern side. It is noticeable that the central grassed area is avoided but should the colony grow large in the following years, it seems likely that even this might be used.

Also from the variation in the state of the nesting birds from fresh eggs to large chicks, the beginning of nesting must have been at least December and possibly November.



Nesting sites of Fairy Terns on Tern Islet, Lake Bagdad, Rott-nest Island on January 30, 1950. Key to numbers: 1, one egg; 2, two eggs; 3, one chick; 4, two chicks; 5, one egg and one chick; 6, one large chick.



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