

THE BIRDS OF ROTTNESST ISLAND

Rottneest Island is located 18 km west off the West Australian coast. It is the largest of a chain of islands and reefs on the continental shelf near Perth. It is about 10.5 km long and 4.5 km at the widest point with an area of approximately 1900 ha. A unique feature of the island is a series of lakes that occupy about 200 ha of the land surface. In summer the salinity levels of some of these lakes are four times that of the surrounding ocean. The island is an A Class Reserve for Public Recreation under the control of the Rottneest Island Management Authority.

The original vegetation of the island consisted of forests of Tea Tree *Melaleuca lanceolata*, Wattle *Acacia rostellifera* and Rottneest Island Pine *Callitris preissii* interspersed with open heath and rush. This original forest now covers less than 10% of the island but a program of regeneration is recovering large tracts of land lost to clearing, fire and erosion.

Bird watching on Rottneest Island is always a small adventure, and it can spring surprises with the sighting of a bird rarely seen anywhere else, or the experience of encountering a species that is common elsewhere but never before been recorded on the island. The Rock Parrot is the only member of this family to live permanently on the island. The Willie Wagtail, Grey Butcherbird and Brush Bronzewing all occur on nearby Garden Island but not on Rottneest. There are few observations of breeding on the island and those that do exist might be based on only one observation. In the last decade eight species have been added to the list of birds known to breed on Rottneest. The history of the birdlife of Rottneest Island is by no means complete, and all observations made on and near the island are useful contributions to the ongoing story of the birds of Rottneest Island.

HABITATS

Open seas around Rottneest Island; Gage Roads out of Fremantle or Hillarys and the ocean beyond. This is where seabird sightings can be made. A favourite site for sea-watching is the old radar hut perched above Cape Vlamingh, where telescope searches can be made for albatross, shearwater, petrel and Australasian Gannet.

Coastal beaches, cliffs, islets and exposed reefs. For cormorants, waders, Eastern Reef Egret and resident Osprey. Beach-washed seabirds could be wearing leg bands, perhaps from one of the Brazilian breeding colonies. Bridled Tern come to breed on the offshore stacks.

Salt lakes and swamps, some saltier than the ocean, others brackish with fresh water soaks that are sometimes visited by Rock Parrot. Waders, water-birds and ducks, an occasional Red-necked Phalarope, with breeding colonies of terns and Silver Gull. The island lakes are part of a wetland chain that supports waders in the south-west.

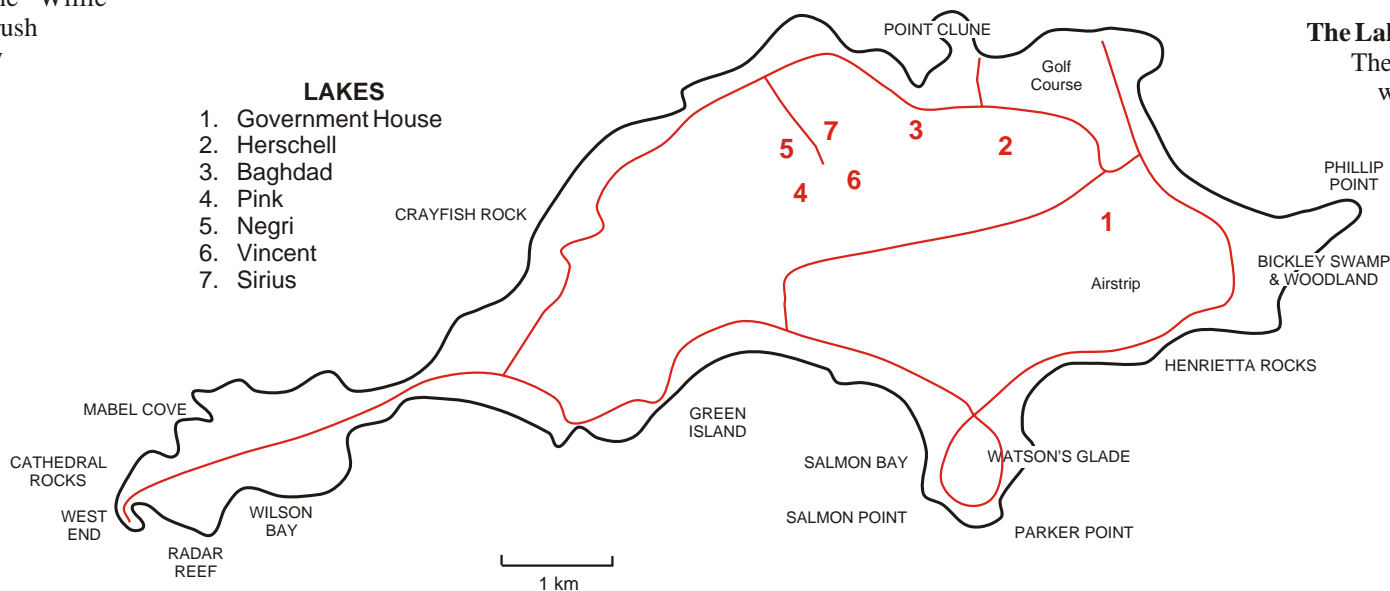
Woodland. *Melaleuca*, *Acacia* and *Pittosporum* stands with their associated understorey; plantations of introduced species and rehabilitated areas. All of these

areas are favoured by Golden Whistler, Red-capped Robin, Western Gerygone and Silvereye. Flowering *Templetonia retusa* attract Singing Honeyeater from all over the island.

Heath and open grassland, often dominated by the invasive *Acanthocarpus preissii*, a sprawling prickly plant that has spread into most cleared sandy areas. This habitat class includes stands of *Rhagodia* and other low shrubs that provide cover and food for White-fronted Chat, Silvereye and White-browed Scrub-wren. Common Pheasant can be flushed from heath and shrubs fringing the woodland.

Developed areas and Settlement includes the airstrip, golf course and playing fields which all provided a habitat for Banded Lapwing, Pied Oystercatcher and the introduced Common Pheasant. Sacred Kingfisher have found the introduced palms a good place to dig nest holes while Welcome Swallow have almost abandoned natural nesting sites for those provided by human habitation and constructions. Red-capped Plover gather in large numbers along the airstrip and apron and there is an increasing number of Silver Gull and Indian Peafowl around the Settlement where they scrounge food from visitors.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR BIRDS



The Lake System

The Causeway is always good for waders in summer and there is a chance of seeing large rafts of Banded Stilt. All sightings of Red-necked Phalarope have been made on Government House and Herschell Lake. Grey-tailed Tattler are often seen along the eastern shore of Herschell Lake. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper favour the very saline samphire sections of Negri, Pink and Sirius. The freshwater soak at the northern end of Lake Baghdad often provides a good range of species. Red-necked Avocet have bred on

the fringes of Pink Lake and Salmon Swamp. Common Greenshank have been recorded on Bickley Swamp.

Woodland

The wooded sections on both sides of the road south of the turnoff to Kingstown are good for bush birds. A limestone track heads downhill from Henrietta Rocks into another good patch of woodland. Watson's Glade on the way to Parker Point is a magical dark forest favoured by Red-capped Robin and Golden Whistler.

Beaches

Phillip Point is where terns usually roost when there are no people around. There are 'clubs' of Crested Tern at a number of sites, often between Salmon Point and Salmon Bay. Salmon Bay is one of the best places to look for Sanderling, dashing up and down the white sand chasing waves. Check low tide times and go out to Wilson Bay, Radar Reef or the West End to look for waders and Eastern Reef Egret feeding on reef animals and small fish trapped in tidal pools. Mabel Cove also has a wide attractive reef at low tide.

Rocky Islets

Green Island is a breeding site for Pied Cormorant where the vegetation is thick, and for Silver Gull when the cormorant leave. Osprey nest on Wallace Island, Salmon Point, Crayfish Rock and Cathedral Rocks. Their nests are used as breeding platforms through the year and the birds are never far away. Bridled Tern breed on the offshore stacks and once in a while Rock Parrot can be seen on the closer stacks. Try to climb to Point Clune, or go to the freshwater soak at Bickley Swamp, where parrots come to drink.

For further information read Saunders D.G. and de Rebeira C.P. *The Birds of Rottnest Island*, 2nd Edition.



Pied Oystercatchers

NOTES

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WHAT IS BIRDS AUSTRALIA?

Birds Australia is a non-profit national organisation working for the enjoyment, study and conservation of Australia's birds. The WA group of Birds Australia has members statewide and offers a variety of activities for members, including conservation and research projects.

Activities and services include excursions, camp-outs, bird surveys and social activities. We also have a library, books for sale and information about birds.

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Osprey

