

## THE BIRDS OF ROTTNEST ISLAND

Rottnest Island is located 18 km west of the West Australian coast. It is the largest in 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 Rottnest Island Authority.

The original vegetation of the island consisted of forests of Tea Tree *Melaleuca lanceolata*, Wattle *Acacia rostellifera* and Rottnest 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 Rottnest 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 Rottnest. 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 Rottnest. The history of the birdlife of Rottnest 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 Rottnest Island.

## HABITATS

**Open seas** around Rottnest 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, West End, 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 Eastern 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. Look for waders, water-birds and ducks, an occasional Red-necked Phalarope and breeding colonies of terns and Silver Gull.

**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* attracts 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 baccata* 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.

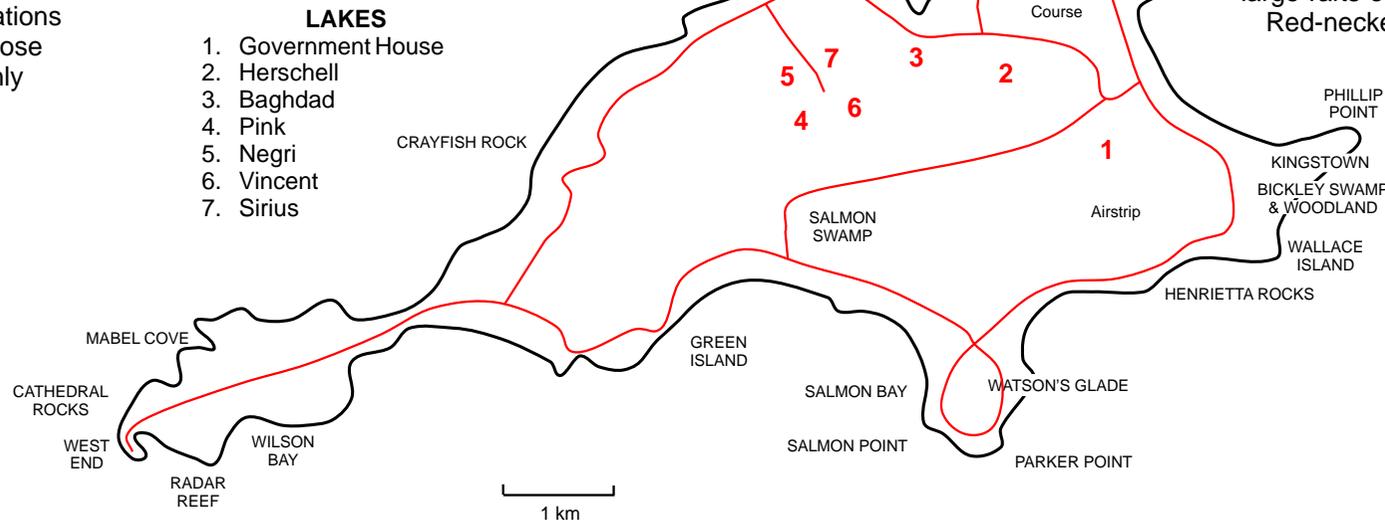
**Developed areas and Settlement** includes the airstrip, golf course and playing fields which all provide a habitat for Banded Lapwing, Australian Pied Oystercatcher and the introduced Common Pheasant. Sacred Kingfisher have found the introduced palms a good place to dig nest holes while Welcome Swallow 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. An occasional male Indian Peafowl may also be seen.

## 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.

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 cormorants leave. Eastern Osprey nest on Wallace Island, Salmon Point, Crayfish Rock and Cathedral Rocks. Their nests are used as roosting 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 Rock Parrot come to drink.

For further information, read:

- Saunders D.G. and de Rebeira C.P. *The Birds of Rottnest Island, 2nd Edition*
- Birds Australia and Rottnest Island Authority (2009), *A Bird's Eye View of Rottnest Island*.



*Australian Pied Oystercatcher*

## NOTES

### WHAT IS BIRDS AUSTRALIA?

Birds Australia is a non-profit organisation working for the enjoyment, study and conservation of Australia's birds.

The Western Australian members of Birds Australia are state-wide and are offered a variety of activities and services including conservation and research projects, excursions, camp-outs, bird surveys and social activities.

We also have a library, books for sale and information about birds.

To view our full range of bird guides and bird lists, visit our web site.

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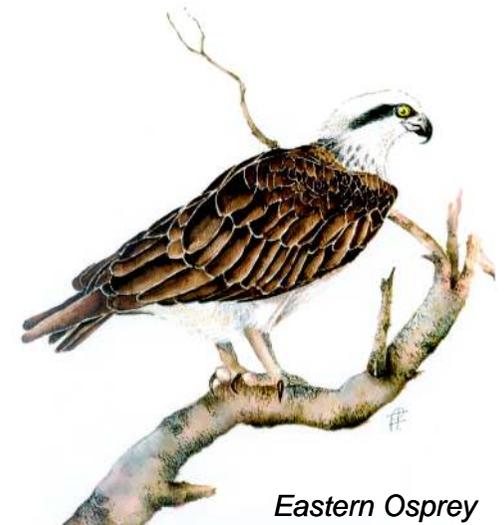
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*Eastern Osprey*

Artist: Pam Free



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