

SEABIRDS AND SHOREBIRDS OBSERVED ON RODRIGUES AND ITS LAGOON

ISLETS IN JULY 1986

B. W. ROWLANDS

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SUMMARY

This paper presents details of eight species of seabirds and four species of shorebirds observed during a short visit to Rodrigues and its lagoon islets in July 1986. Included is the first record for Rodrigues of the Lightmantled Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*, possibly the most northerly for the species.

INTRODUCTION

The birds of Rodrigues (19 42S, 63 25E), western Indian Ocean, have been relatively poorly studied, in particular as regards the current status of the seabirds on the islets of the lagoon. The main recent references are Gill (1967), Bourne (1968), Staub (1973, 1976) and Cheke (1978).

I arrived on Rodrigues by air from Mauritius on 2 July 1986, and during my stay of 17 days covered much of the mainland as well as landing on nine lagoon islets and observing a number of others.

Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a list of the lagoon islets of Rodrigues and my visits to them. Outcrops and mudbanks enclosed by mainland bays are not included. I was unable to visit Ile Marianne, an islet north of Pointe Caverne, Ile Hermitage and the islet off Ile Hermitage since a boat trip I arranged for 17 July fell through. Iles Catherine and Frégate were observed from the air on flying in, likewise Butte aux Sables on departure. Islet dimensions are from measurements off a 1:10 000 set of maps (Institut Geographique National 1976). The names of two islets, Dominique and Mouse, do not appear on the maps and were given to me by Creole fishermen. On only one islet, well-wooded Ile Cocos, were seabirds definitely nesting, and then only two species.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Seabirds

Lightmantled Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*

A single bird came ashore alive but in an emaciated condition on 12 July at a tiny settlement called Ile Michel (Fig. 1), near Petite Butte in Anse Grande Var on the south coast of Rodrigues. It died the same day after being picked up by a Creole family, who then displayed it for six days on their dwelling before disposing of it. I photographed it on 13 July, identifying it

TABLE 1
THE LAGOON ISLETS OF RODRIGUES, JULY 1986

No. Island	Substratum	Length (m)	Width (m)	Height (m)	Landing date	Observed date	Inhabited?
1 Ile aux Fous	basaltic	320	60	17	9		No (defunct light)
2 Ile Diamant	basaltic	100	30	12	3		No
3 Ile aux Sables	coral sand	830	180	2	3		No (two empty huts)
4 Ile Cocos	coral sand	1 400	180	4	3		Yes (two huts, temporary watchman)
5 Ile Marianne	basaltic	80	65	14			No
6 Butte aux Sables	coral sand	cay not shown on maps				19 (air)	No
7 Ile Catherine	basaltic	280	140	22		2 (air)	No
8 Ile Frégate	basaltic	535	365	41	18	2 (air)	No
9 Ile Destinée	basaltic	215	200	17		18	No
10 Ile Crabe	basaltic & coralline	1 160	715	45	18		Yes (agricultural station)
11 Islet off Crabe	coralline	30	20	3		18	No
12 Ile Dominique	coralline	70	30	1		18	No
13 North Pintade	coralline	290	220	3		18	No
14 South Pintade	coralline	230	130	2		18	No
15 Paille en Queue	coralline	380	230	4		18	No
16 Islet below South Pintade	coralline	65	10	1		18	No
17 Ile deux Freres (West of Gombrani)	coralline	270	75	4		18	No
18 Islet north of Gombrani	coralline	160	40	2		18	No
19 Ile Gombrani	coralline	1 780	330	6	18		Yes (two watchmen, two huts)
20 Mouse Island (East of Gombrani)	coralline	50	40	2		18	No
21 Ile Plate (Flat I.)	coralline	430	150	2	18		No
22 Ile Pierrot (Cat I.)	coralline	1 090	500	8	18		Yes (three huts)
23 Islet north of Pointe Caverne	coralline	50	15	1			No
24 Misel Island	coralline	35	25	4		18	No
25 Ile Hermitage	basaltic & coralline	360	150	27			No
26 Islet off Ile Hermitage	coralline	45	35	3			No

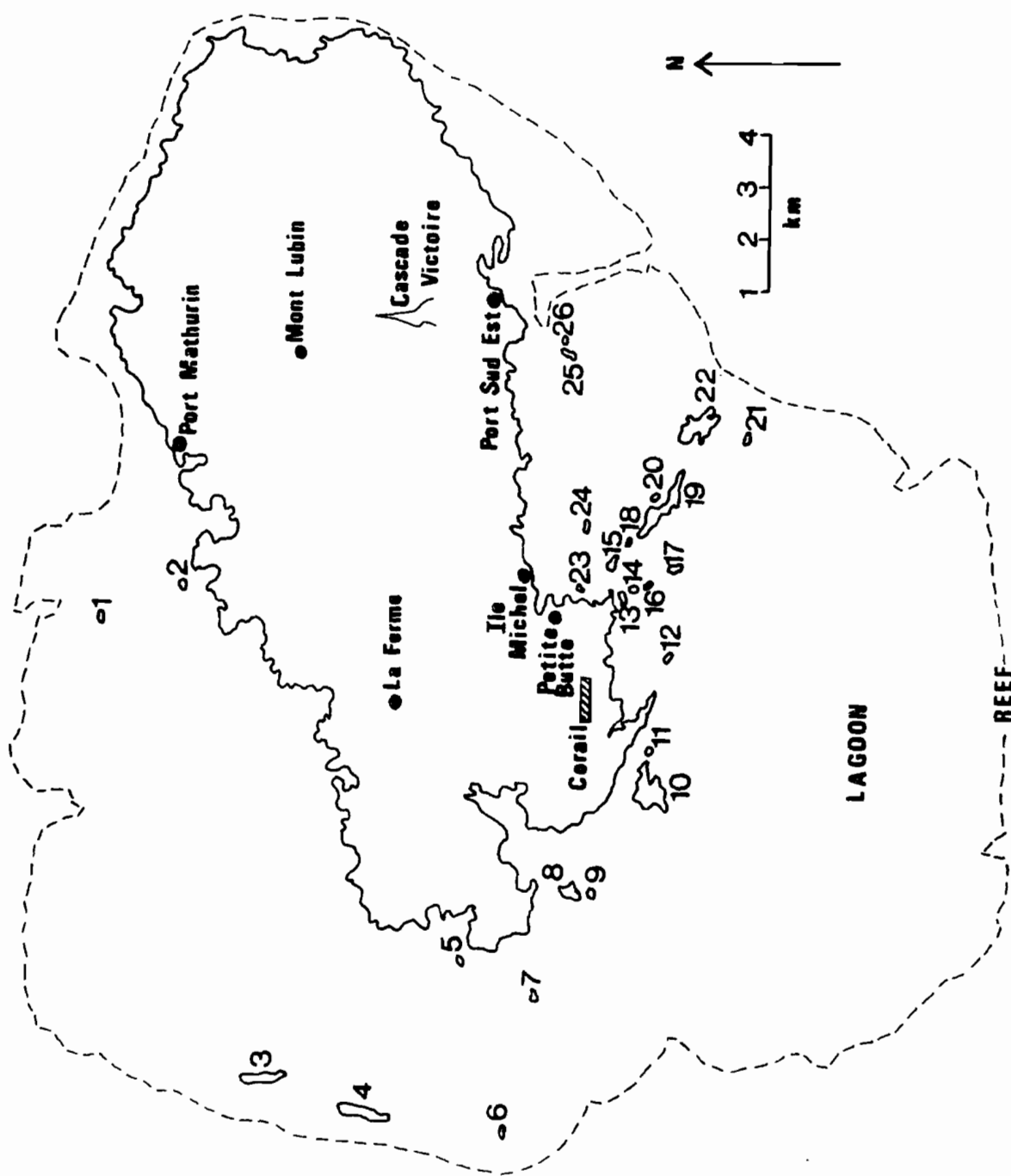


Figure 1

The Lagoon islets of Rodrigues. See Table 1 for names and other details

by bill shape and plumage patterns (Figs. 2-4). Previously unknown to the local Creole fishermen who frequent the lagoon, the bird attracted attention owing to its novelty value.

The normal pelagic range of the Lightmantled Sooty Albatross is from the pack-ice to *c.* 33oS (Marrison 1983). It has not previously been recorded from any of the Mascarenes, including Rodrigues. (Staub 1976, F. Staub pers. comm.) and the occurrence noted here may well be the most northerly confirmed record in the Indian Ocean. By contrast, the Sooty Albatross *Phoebetria fusca*, with its generally more northerly distribution (Harrison 1983), has been recorded as a vagrant both from Mauritius (Meinertzhagen 1912) and off Reunion (Gruchet 1976). The most northerly *Phoebetria* record in the Indian Ocean appears to be that of Bailey (1968) who reported an immature, species unknown, off the northern tip of Madagascar.

Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau*

On 13 July I visited the site, in the Rodrigues hills, where young had been reported by A. Cheke in 1973 (Staub 1976). No sign of birds could be found.

Wedgetailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*

No birds were seen or heard, but its presence on Ile Frégate (Staub 1973, 1976) was indicated by droppings between boulders.

Redtailed Tropic Bird *Phaethon rubricauda*

On 10 July, 10 pairs were occupying cavities up in a precipice above a goat path on the eastern side of Cascade Victoire, a steep valley leading up from Port Sud Est on the south coast. Much calling emanated from the cavities as birds arrived and departed, but it was impossible to examine them closely because the cliffs were unstable following heavy rains. However, breeding appeared probable.

Whitetailed Tropic Bird *Phaethon lepturus*

Six adults were observed in flight along the western cliffs of Cascade Victoire on 10 July. No breeding behaviour was noticed.

The two species of tropicbirds were both seen in the same areas in which Staub (1973, 1976) found them breeding for the first time this century in May 1967.

Common Noddy *Anous stolidus*

A large dense flock of some 500 birds was loafing on a beach in the southwest of Ile Cocos on 3 July. Four nests, each with a single fresh egg, were found inland, within the trees; all were ground scrapes. Birds foraged around both Ile Cocos and Ile aux Sables, and out to sea.



Figure 2

Lightmantled Sooty Albatross, Ile Michel, Rodrigues,
photographed on 13 July 1986



Figure 3

Lightmantled Sooty Albatross, Ile Michel, Rodrigues,
photographed on 13 July 1986



Head of Lightmantled Sooty Albatross, Ile Michel, Rodrigues,
photographed on 13 July 1986

Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*

About 100 birds were active seaward of Ile Cocos and Ile aux Sables on 3 July. Nesting was noted only on Ile Cocos where there were about 30 nests, all high (up to five metres) in *Casuarina* trees. Some had single eggs about to hatch, others young in various stages of development. Most nests were too high to enable examination of contents.

Fairy Tern *Gygis alba*

Only six individuals were seen, four on Ile Cocos and two on Ile aux Sables, on 3 July. All were in constant movement and there was no sign of breeding.

Shorebirds

Greenbacked Heron *Butorides striatus*

On Ile aux Sables three pairs were observed nest-building in *Casuarina* trees on 3 July. Birds were commonly observed around the coasts of Rodrigues; also a few were seen inland.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

I observed 15 birds at Ile Cocos on 3 July, seven in flight off Ile aux Fous (Booby Island) on 9 July, 12 foraging at Petite Butte (lowtide mudflats) on 13 July and one at Gombrani Island on 18 July.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Three birds were seen feeding on a lowtide mudflat at Petite Butte on 13 July.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Seven birds were seen foraging at Ile Cocos on 3 July, and 10 birds the same day on Ile aux Sables.

DISCUSSION

The only offshore islets of Rodrigues on which breeding by seabirds has been definitely observed over the past thirty years are Ile Frégate (Wedgetailed Shearwater) and Ile Cocos and Ile aux Sables (both with Common Noddies, Lesser Noddies and Fairy Terns). Too little is known regarding the breeding periodicity of the terns of Rodrigues to be certain whether the low nesting numbers I observed represent any real recent decrease in population sizes, although this is the opinion locally. However, lack of any observed seabirds nesting on Ile aux Sables may well have been a result of the release of a domestic cat *Felis catus* on the island in late 1984/early 1985. According to islanders I spoke to, when this cat was eventually destroyed in late 1985 there were no birds left and the cat "weighed 35 pounds"! The small numbers of waders (Charadrii) observed are

generally comparable with earlier reports. Whereas the sandy beaches of Ile Cocos and Ile aux Sables provide apparently suitable foraging sites, as do certain mainland mudflats at low tide, all the coralline islets in the southern lagoon exhibit largely steep upraised and undercut coral edges not conducive to waders. Suitable habitats for waders at Rodrigues are few.

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- B.W. Rowlands, Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa.