



CORAL CAYS

THERE'S A LOT MORE TO A TROPICAL PARADISE THAN MEETS THE EYE

The dynamic cays of the warm seas in the Australian tropics support teeming colonies of seabirds

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DICK EUSSEN

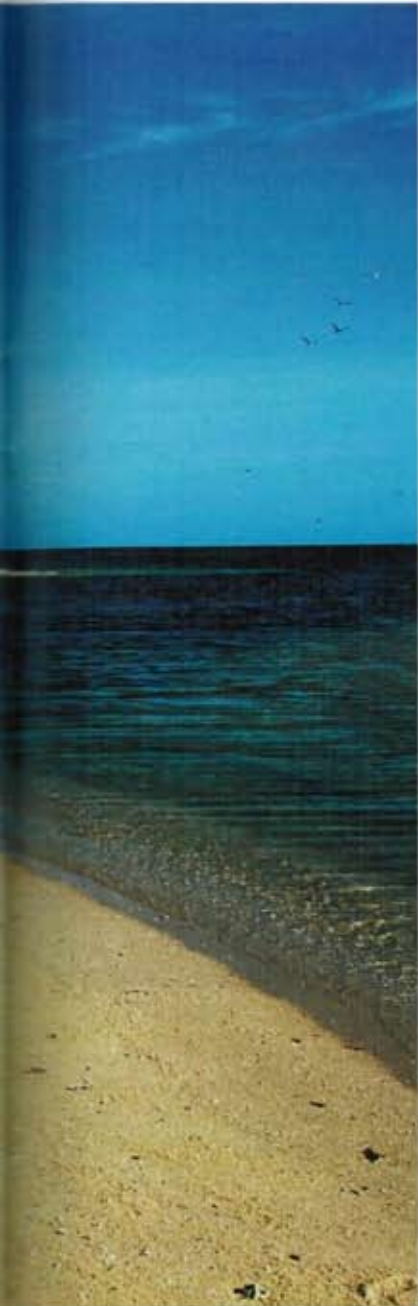
In a way, a coral cay is as alive as the wildlife that teems upon it. From the sea floor, living coral works towards the water's surface to build coral cays. Once the growth breaks the surface, the 'reeflets' trap dead coral, sand and debris and begin to create a sand cay. Some cays attract drifting mangrove and other seedlings and become low-lying wooded islets. It takes long years for coral and sand cays be stabilised by grass, scrubs, and later tree growth, and many, continually broken apart by cyclones, never make it. Most cays are a couple of metres above sea level and are highly vulnerable to change.

Sand cays sit on miniature surrounding coral reefs that are exposed at low tide. The trade winds and tides shape the cays into crescent forms, with tails of graceful converging spits. More likely than other islets to attract masses of seabirds to breed, sand cays are by no means a benign environment. Nesting birds have to brave the tropical sun, trade winds and cyclones, to mate and lay their eggs on the treeless, often grassless, hot sands. There is no shade, only sun, wind and sea spray.

The Great Barrier Reef has a myriad of sand and coral cays, but there are only a few in the northern

seas; the Gulf of Carpentaria, Arafura Sea and Timor Sea. These northern seas are arguably the richest in fish numbers and attract masses of seabirds, which are forced onto smaller areas for breeding than their Great Barrier Reef counterparts. Places such as Pelican Island north of Karumba in the Gulf of Carpentaria are the only option for seabirds for hundreds of sea miles around.

One such cay is Haul Round Island. Named by Phillip Parker King who sailed past in August 1819 in search of the river that would guide him to Australia's mythical inland sea, Haul Round is twinned with Entrance Island at the mouth of a wide deep river, which he named the Liverpool, after Lord Liverpool, Secretary of the (British) Treasury. It is uncertain whether King's Haul Round Island was then only one island, or the two that are evident today. Now, a pile of oyster-encrusted rocks with a light beacon sits some 600 m to the east of a dune-like sand cay, about 5 m high. I first explored the two cays in 1978 on a visit to the Aboriginal community of Maningrida, Northern Territory. My primary interest was the fishing, but I soon became enthralled by the numerous terns and other seabirds that met and guided our little boat into the calm waters of the lagoon between the cays.



Breeding was in full progress, with terns and oystercatchers on the sand cay, and a small, but busy rookery of egrets, cormorants and herons in a stand of mangroves growing on the grit collected in the rocks of the eastern islet. An Osprey nest topped the beacon and in the mangroves a pair of White-bellied Sea-Eagles had built a bulky nest in danger of falling into the water.

Later in the morning, two small outboard-powered tinnies manned by Aborigines arrived at the sand cay. They moved amongst the nesting sites, something we had avoided when we landed, so as not to interfere with the birds. If terns are disturbed from the nest, the opportunistic Silver Gulls take their eggs or young. However, this did not worry the collectors who gathered eggs in plastic buckets. These locals then led a semi-subsistence lifestyle and eggs were a welcome addition to their diet. Before the introduction of motorised boats, they had paddled across from Juda Point on the mainland in open dugout canoes and ferried eggs back to camps scattered along the wide beach.

I have been back to Haul Round Island many times since 1978, but on my last visit there had been some dramatic changes. The largest cyclone ever recorded in

Australia, Cyclone Monica, hit the Arnhem Land coast in April 2006 with terrifying Category 5 force winds. The storm's eye passed over Haul Round Island before the cyclone smashed into Arnhem Land and Kakadu.

The mangrove rookery was no more. In its place, a few wind and wave-lashed trunks stood like silent sentinels amongst the clean-washed rocks. The sand cay had weathered the storm much better, though a new light beacon had replaced the old one that was blown away by Monica's fury.

What happens to birds in a cyclone is not clear. Legend has it that they leave ahead of the storm, but that is not always true. When Cyclone Larry hit Innisfail and the Atherton Tablelands in 2005, our Mareeba home copped Category 2 and 3 strong winds for almost four hours. Over 70 Peaceful and Bar-shouldered Doves, Double-barred Finches, and two Pale-headed Rosellas, hunkered down calmly in our spare chook pen, shielded from the wind by a shed. A collection of honeyeaters and whistlers gathered in and about the patio, also protected from the winds. If we went out onto the patio, the birds flopped about the ground and refused to fly away. During a lull, I went for a walk in the yard and found many more birds—

Clockwise from main photo, left: Visitors soak up the sun and birds on Haul Round Island

A mixed flock of Black-naped, Lesser Crested and Crested Terns, en-route to the baitfish grounds

Haul Round Island sand cay and the ship-guiding beacon is a haven for seabirds

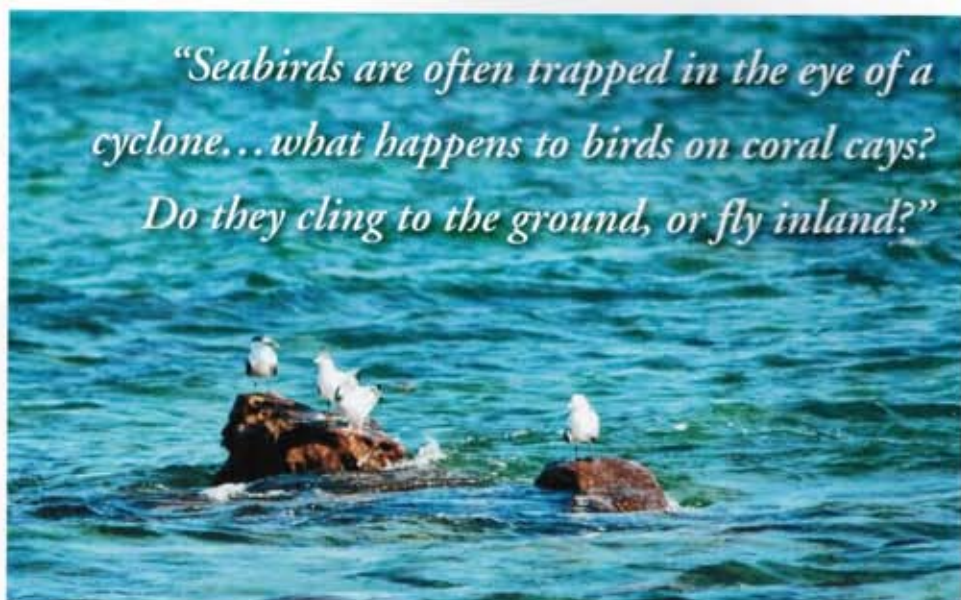
A Bridled Tern soars above the island



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honeyeaters, doves, and finches—under bushes. There was little wind close to the ground, in contrast to the treetops where branches were wrenched off and carried away.

Seabirds are often trapped in the eye of a cyclone and many a ship's captain, caught in a cyclone, has reported tired birds landing on ships as the eye passed over. Cyclone Larry forced many seabirds inland, as far as the Atherton Tablelands, where they drifted about Lake Tinaroo for some days before vanishing. Were they lost? So, what happens to birds on coral cays? Do they cling to the ground, or fly inland? No one knows.

The Haul Round Island seabird population appears to have suffered little from its encounter with Monica. The rocky islet is bare and would not support a rookery unless the mangroves return, but the cay is flourishing. All the species I observed on previous trips are still there, including the Sooty and Pied Oystercatchers, which love abusing me on every visit. Wheeling flocks of pelicans glide in to land in formation on the narrow sand spit that tails out from the cay, and herons, egrets, cormorants, and Jabirus (Black-necked Storks) can also be seen. Kites, Ospreys, and graceful sea-eagles patrol the skies. However, the cay's most important role is as a breeding ground for the multitude of terns. When the eggs hatch, thousands of terns take to the air in search of prey for their hungry broods, peeling off in small flocks to distant schools of small fish, or skimming over the reefs in the lagoon in a mass spectacle of movement and colour.

On the cay, hundreds of terns juggle for breeding space, others swoop around in wheeling flocks, or drift gracefully in the air currents over the cay and the lagoon; and oystercatchers fearlessly chase away anything that does not belong. Nesting begins in late summer and at this time of year, birds exploit every bit of space above the high water mark. On the edges, high seas coupled with windy conditions often undermine and collapse fragile grassy banks that tumble into the sea carrying dozens of nests with them.

Frigatebirds are ever-present, ambushing terns from above as they return with small fish for their young. In the lagoon, I have watched frigatebirds hovering over balled schools of small fish while from below hungry Golden Trevally fish ate away at the teeming mass, forcing the fish to the surface where the frigatebirds took them at will, until none of the countless fish remained. While the frigatebird is an excellent hunter in its own right—skimming, and skipping to snatch fish, squid, and baby turtles from the waves—when the terns are breeding, frigatebirds find theft an easier way to make a living.

Later in the year, Haul Round Island is a staging site for a myriad of waders that land in small flocks from late July onwards, though the bulk arrives in September. They gather on the cay for brief periods before moving the 10 km to the mainland. The same pattern repeats during the northbound migration at the end of the wet season (March–April), though small flocks of waders can be found all through the winter dry season.

Nowadays, few Aborigines visit the cay—they buy their eggs in the Maningrida supermarkets. The traditional owners have imposed strict rules of conduct for anyone visiting the cays. Other dangers—introduced foxes, rats, cats—do not occur here, although several natural predators like Estuarine Crocodiles and airborne predators (kites, eagles, frigatebirds and gulls) regularly visit. The only human visitors are sailors—who drop anchor in the lagoon—and the occasional birdwatcher.

Any day on Haul Round Island is dramatic in the daily life of its birds. Already active when daylight comes, at dusk the roar of their wings and raucous cries provide an unforgettable finale to a day on the cay.

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Above: Rocks in the lagoon make a handy resting spot for young terns



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