

# CORELLA

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## SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 267

## Suomi Island, Easter Group, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia

**Location:** 28°42'46"S, 113°50'18"E; 73 kilometres west of Geraldton, Western Australia. Located 5.3 kilometres east of Rat Island, the largest of the islands in the Easter Group of the Houtman Abrolhos.

**Status:** Houtman Abrolhos Islands Reserve No. A20253, vested under the Land Act 1933 (WA) with the Minister for Fisheries for conservation of flora and fauna, tourism and for purposes associated with the fishing industry.

**Description:** Suomi Island has an area of 20 hectares. It is 2500 metres long by 100 metres wide and two metres above MHWS. The geological composition of the island is a composite island structure<sup>1</sup>. The island is comprised of aeolian limestone platform reef overlain by storm cast coral shingle, with areas of concreted coral framestone along the western shore. There are two tidal ponds on the island.

Several narrow rubble beaches along the western shore are broken by low cemented coral limestone cliffs. Along the eastern (seaward) shoreline the coast is comprised wholly of coral rubble and shingle storm-cast ridges.

The island is dominated by low salt-tolerant shrubs and succulents and forbs<sup>2</sup>. Sandy areas support *Atriplex cinerea*, *Myoprum insulare* and *Threlkeldia diffusa* dwarf shrubs. Elsewhere, *Halosarcia halocnemoides* dominates. There are three small stands of the mangrove *Avicennia marina*, the largest surrounding a tidal pond. Of the 18 plants recorded, 5 (28%) are exotic<sup>2</sup>.

**Landing:** On to the north point of the island by dinghy from a deep-water channel leading from Eastern Passage.

**Ornithological History:** Most visits by ornithologists have been brief, and restricted to the vicinity of the landing site. We visited the island in August 2001, November 1987 and 2007, December 1999, 2006 and 2008, January 2000 and April, July and October 2014. Seabird nesting colonies were mapped using aerial photography extensively between 2006 and 2008. R. E Johnstone visited in October 1981 and August 1983 and K. Coates visited on numerous occasions between 1989 and 2006. The first extensive surveys were conducted by A. Burbidge and P. Fuller during their island-wide surveys during the summers of 1981, 1991, 1995, 1996 and 1999.

### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Pandion cristatus* Eastern Osprey – Three nests, one active in 1992 with large young<sup>3</sup>; one active but empty in December 2006. Three fledglings observed in nest at north end of island in November 2008<sup>4</sup>.

*Haliaeetus leucogaster* White-bellied Sea-Eagle – One recently used nest adjacent to mangroves was empty in December 2006.

*Larus pacificus* Pacific Gull – Two pairs nested on high ground above high water mark and constructed nests of woven brown algae, principally *Ecklonia radiata*, *Sargassum distichum* and *Cystoseira trinodis*. Nest sites were occasionally reused, or new nests were constructed close (<3m) to old sites. Eggs are usually

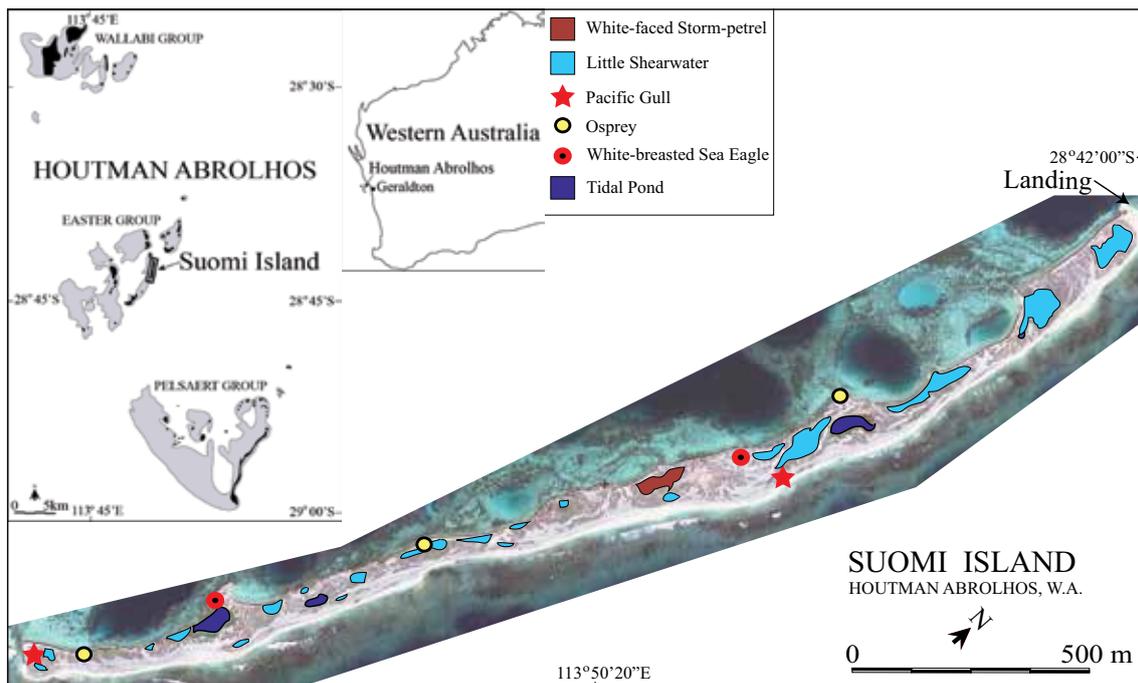


Figure 1. Suomi Island, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia.



Figure 2. Aerial photograph of Suomi Island looking south.

laid in August and young fledged by late November or early December. In December 2006 adults were attending fledglings.

*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull – Although a single nest was found by Burbidge and Fuller<sup>5</sup> in 1999, only roosting adults were recorded in 2006 and 2007. It is possible the nests of this species were missed or that nesting occurs at other times of the year.

*Puffinus assimilis* Little Shearwater – We estimated 1343 burrows in 2006<sup>4</sup>, although the breeding population would have been somewhat lower than the total burrow count due to a significant proportion of burrows that remain unused. The density of burrows from ten randomly selected 5m x 5m quadrats averaged 0.1/m<sup>2</sup>, (range 0.01-0.20/m<sup>2</sup>). By the time of our visit in December 2006 and 2008 burrows were deserted. Nests occurred in deeper sandy areas of the island dominated by sparse *Atriplex cinerea* / *Myoprum insulare* / *Threkeldia diffusa* dwarf shrubs.

*Pelagodroma marina* White-faced Storm-Petrel – Approximately 1500 burrows were recorded in in December 2006<sup>4</sup>. Burrow density from ten randomly selected 5m x 5m quadrats averaged 0.53/m<sup>2</sup> (range 0.40-0.72 m<sup>2</sup>). A single area of sandy soil with occasional, low *Atriplex cinerea* appeared to be the only rookery on Suomi Island for this species. In December

2006 adults were incubating eggs.

*Onychoprion anaethetus* Bridled Tern – In some years estimates of up to 1000 pairs (1991)<sup>6</sup> of this species were recorded but none in other years (1999)<sup>5</sup>. In December 2006, a total of 219 nest sites were estimated<sup>4</sup>. Bridled Terns nested across all areas of the island, favouring *Nitraria billardierei* bushes among broken, cemented coral framestone shore cliffs fringing the western shoreline, as well as along the fringes of stands of the mangrove *Avicennia marina*.

*Onychoprion fuscata* Sooty Tern – Highly variable breeding numbers depending upon year. Up to 3000–5000 pairs were reported in 1991 by Burbidge and Fuller<sup>6</sup>, but only 500–1000 in 1995<sup>5</sup>. Breeding at the northern end of the island in December 1992 was reported by Coates<sup>3</sup>. No Sooty Terns were recorded in the intervening years from 1996–2008<sup>5,4</sup>. In October 1981 approximately 100 were observed displaying over Suomi Island<sup>7</sup>. Similarly to Leo's Island<sup>8</sup>, no Sooty Terns nested on Suomi Island in 2012 or 2013 as the population seems to have dispersed to Rat Island.

### Factors Affecting Status

The island is visited infrequently due to the difficulty in landing; the island being surrounded by shallow reefs. However,

driftwood for saunas was collected regularly from the island by rock lobster fishermen in the past.

Australian Sea-lions *Neophoca cinerea* use some near shore sandy areas and stands of mangroves as haulouts. Where burrows occur in sandy areas, sea-lion activity often collapses Little Shearwater burrows.

Like other islands in the Houtman Abrolhos, there are several introduced weed species, including: Wild Oats *Avena fatua*, the Medic Burr *Medicago polymorpha* and Wild Radish *Raphanus sativus*. Establishment of weed species in sandy areas is likely to lead to vegetation change, reduction in root biomass and increased potential for erosion of sands used by burrowing seabirds.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorants – Roosting occurred at times along the western shore.
<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	Australian Pied Oystercatcher – No nests were located but a pair of this species was observed.
<i>Sternula nereis</i>	Fairy Tern – Pairs were observed roosting along the eastern coral ridges. It is likely this species has nested here previously.
<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	Roseate Tern – Flocks of birds roosted along the eastern shoreline.
<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	Caspian Tern – Observed roosting <sup>3</sup> .
<i>Egretta sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Egret – A pair of birds was observed in mangroves adjacent one of the tidal ponds. Quite possible this species nests under cover here.
<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	Crested Tern – Observed roosting. <sup>3</sup>

### Other Vertebrates Recorded

Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>
Red-capped Plover	<i>Charadrius ruficapillus</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Grey-tailed Tattler	<i>Tringa brevipes</i>
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>

### Banding

*Puffinus assimilis* – 28 nestlings (23 August 1970)

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