

MEMBERS REPORTS FROM ABROAD

ASCENSION ISLAND – FEB 1982

Major P.J.Hubert, MBE, QUEENS

"Your recce to Ascension Islands is on." "Where is that?"

Such was the start of a brief but fascinating trip to one of the remotest spots in the world -a volcanic lump, s8 miles square, set in the Ocean just south of the Equator, 900 miles from Africa, and 1400 miles from Brazil. Most of its surface area is brown lava, and volcanic clinker rising to cones of up to a thousand feet, all devoid of any water. It resembles a vast ash heap. In the centre of the island is the Green Mountain, which rises to nearly 3000 feet, and now has a cap of lush green grass and a huge variety of exotic plants which were introduced in the nineteenth century after the establishment of a permanent Royal Marine garrison. The vegetation is spreading rapidly down the slopes as more moisture is attracted to the Island and retained. Prior to the last century the Island was very arid and bare and apparently supported no passerines. Now there are four species which breed, (Mynah, Canary, Red-cheeked waxbill and Red-throated Francolin). These are the survivors of a long list of introductions made in the last century. Apart from the Francolin, which is uncommon, they flourish and large flocks of Mynahs and Wax bills are to be found all over the Green Mountain with a few appearing at the lower levels also.

However it is the sea-birds that are the main source of interest. At present only the Wideawake Terns breed in large numbers on Ascension Island. The main breeding grounds for the remaining ten species is an islet off the South East corner –Boatswain Bird Island, a 300 foot high lump of lava about 200 yards off shore, and looking rather like a white Christmas cake. In former times vast numbers of sea-birds roosted and bred on the main island until the predation by the hundreds of wild cats, the successors of the few introduced in the 1950's to control rats, destroyed them. Shortage of time did not allow me an opportunity to visit Boatswain Bird Island; though, from a distance, I was able to see a little of the comings and goings – a few Brown Boobies gliding up the coast towards their inshore fishing grounds, a few White Boobies and Black Noddies purposefully setting off for their more distant fishing areas beyond the horizon, up to 100 Frigate Birds drifting overhead, like black witches, as they waited for an easy meal of a hapless fledgling. Sadly I saw nothing of the two species of Boatswain Bird, nor the nocturnal Madeiran Storm Petrel. Perhaps it is of interest to list the approximate numbers of each species reported by the BOU expedition of 1957-9.

Red-footed Booby	30
Brown Booby	2,000
White (or masked) Booby	9,000
Ascension Island Frigate Bird	2,000
Red Billed Tropic Bird	1,000
Yellow Billed Tropic Bird	2,000
Wideawake (or Sooty) Tern	750,000
Atlantic Fairy Tern	2,000
Black Noddy	75,000
Brown Noddy	1,000
Madeiran Storm Petrel	3,000

The Fairy Tern was quite one of the most attractive birds I have ever seen. Climbing the Mountain Road I was looking across the white trachytic cliffs when I noticed several pairs of white Fairy Terns, swooping and fluttering like butterflies in a stormy wind. Others were seen resting in pairs on the narrow rocky ledges, and the odd one was in a tree. After pausing scarcely a few moments I found one hovering but a few feet in front of my face, its immaculate white wings translucent against the sky. After about half a minute it rose to a small branch of a eucalyptus tree whence it gazed down at me with enormous black eyes. Then suddenly it was gone, swooping and twisting over the valley towards the cliffs with its partner.

No visitor should leave without seeing the Wideawake Fairs -the. Breeding grounds of the thousands of terns. The Fairs lie in an arc along the south west corner of the Island beyond the airstrip. The Ascension Island

Wideawake apparently has a 9- 10 month breeding cycle (unlike the normal annual cycle in the rest of their range) and I was lucky to coincide with the early part of the breeding period. I approached over a lunar wasteland of rocks and clinker, passing the paw marks of Cats in the sand, white guano-stained patches of rock, hundreds of broken egg shells and bleached bones -the debris of an earlier season. The breeding sites clearly shift a little within the general area. Descending the gently sloping sides of a dried river bed I came to this years site -a swathe of closely packed birds stretching over an area some 300 by 50 yards. Overhead were hundreds more shrieking terns. This was one of at least three such colonies. As I approached the area I passed dozens of corpses - heads and a pair of scimitar wings. These were the remains of the cats I feast.

Breeding was well under way, with most birds sitting on a single brown marked egg. A few eggs had already hatched and the half dozen Frigate birds were taking their toll of chicks that exposed themselves for more than a few seconds. They would swoop down to snatch up the grey downy chick, the parent bird looking on with almost no concern. I saw one chick stray and try to hide in the rocks, only to be viciously jabbed to death by a nearby adult; this is apparently a significant cause of mortality. The overall mortality rate must be colossal, though less than it used to be: until recently vast numbers of eggs were collected by the St Helenian labour force and, before them, the garrison. In 1835 125,000 were reportedly collected in one week alone. Despite these depredations the terns survive and flourish.

It was notable that the terns seemed to avoid the more sandy patches, and bred amongst the razor sharp rocks and clinker, each egg laid about three feet from its neighbour. Every five minutes or so there would be a roar as thousands of terns rose screaming to the air as if they were about to attack an intruder, though I was unable to detect the cause of their alarm. After a quarter of a minute's turmoil the birds would settle again, though the Frigate birds had made the most of their opportunity again.

Ascension Island has one other creature of great interest -the Green Turtle, "Between December and March these 500lb animals return from the Brazilian coasts to this Island which is just 7 miles across: a truly remarkable feat of navigation. At night they climb the sandy beaches to dig their nests and lay up to 150 eggs each (Usually up to four nests are made by each female over a period of several weeks). I was not lucky enough to see this activity though in the mornings their caterpillar up the sand was much in evidence.

The sea-birds are but one of many features unique to Ascension Island. For even the casual visitor there are sights and experiences not to be repeated elsewhere. So if you, too, are told "The recce is on" I suggest you jump to it.

References:

B. Stonehouse -Wideawake Island. (Hutchinson 1960).
D. Hart-Davis - Ascension. (Constable 1972).
Ibis 103b (1962)
Nature Vol 204 (1964)
Auk 74 (1954)
Auk 76 (1959)