



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Adventures in Paradise

(The Great Barrier Reef Research Station on Heron Island)

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By Roger Paradise

During the early part of December 1975 I was fortunate enough to spend 10 days at [The Great Barrier Reef Research Station](#) on [Heron Island](#). Heron Island is part of the [Capricorn Group](#) of islands, situated some 45 miles east of Gladstone, at the southern extremity of the barrier reef proper. The islands of this group are coral [cays](#); they are formed from sand and coral debris accumulating on a sheltered corner of a platform reef, which is then stabilised by a cover of vegetation.

The approach to Heron is disappointing. We were confronted by a maze of oil storage tanks, generator shed and radar masts, definitely not in keeping with the image of a National Park. However, once on the island the picture changed. Birds! There were birds running, birds on eggs, birds feeding young and birds flying, there were birds everywhere. The most noticeable species on Heron is the graceful [White-capped Noddy *Anous minutus*](#) which has an extremely long breeding season. Some pairs were courting and commencing building when we arrived while others had fully fledged chicks. They prefer to nest in the [Pisonia](#) trees which dominate the centre of the island, building their nests from the [Pisonia grandis](#) leaves stuck together with excreta. A single egg is balanced precariously on this platform. There are literally millions of these birds on Heron; the nests weigh down all the trees and the birds are continuously flying overhead to the feeding grounds at the edge of the reef.



White-capped Noddy on nest. Note the unusual location of the nest in a [Casuarina equisetifolia](#) tree instead of the usual [Pisonia grandis](#).

[Banded Landrails *Rallus philippensis*](#) are very common around the Research Station. They are attractive ground birds about the size of a small bantam, with a black and white barred breast and belly with a distinctive brown band on the breast. Several broods were observed, but they are restricted to the area of the buildings possibly due to the lack of fresh surface water on the island. The [Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis*](#) is also common, being a regular visitor to the kitchen where they forage around the dustbins. There is an island race of [silveryeye](#), which is much larger than the local [silveryeye](#) of Sydney.

[Herons *Egretta sacra*](#) from which the island takes its name, are breeding residents. Two colour phases are present, white and grey. We saw them both feeding on the reef flat at low tide.

Probably the most interesting bird nesting on the island is the [Wedgetailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*](#) whose courting fills the night air with ghostly caterwauling. Their burrows riddle the floor of the [Pisonia](#) forest and their nightly arrival at dusk is a magnificent sight - hundreds of birds flying overhead silhouetted against the sky.

Heron Island is truly a tropical paradise marred only by the poorly planned development. However, its imperfections are easily overlooked as one is sitting on the beach at dusk as the sun disappears below the horizon while the Noddies fly gracefully to roost, and the Shearwaters arrive with a roar of wings.

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