MIGRATION

After departing from the breeding grounds, the birds fly rapidly north to their wintering grounds around the Aleutian Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula between Alaska and Siberia. This journey of about 15,000 kilometres, passing New Zealand and Japan, is completed in only two months.

After resting up, the return journey begins, following the coast of North America to California, then south west across the Pacific. For most of their journey the birds are aided by prevailing winds, but on their final leg from the central Pacific the birds battle across head winds, returning to their nesting grounds exhausted.

From September to April the birds' return at dusk provides a spectacular sight. A viewing platform enables visitors to enjoy this experience with minimum disturbance to the birds. You can also watch birds return by standing quietly on the limestone pathway. As the birds return at nightfall all is eerily silent, save for the whirr of thousands of wings. However, as the birds settle, their calls soon develop as the hungry chick welcomes home its parents.

CARE OF THE COLONY

A shearwater colony so close to human settlement is a delicate system easily disturbed. To aid its survival, the following points need to be noted:

- Walk only on formed tracks. It is impossible to walk through the colony without crushing nesting burrows.
- No dogs or cats are allowed on the island as it is a proclaimed Conservation Reserve.
- Do not remove apparently orphaned young as they cannot be hand reared. Leave them in a sheltered location.
- Report cats, dogs or any noticeable damage to Moyne Shire Council.

CONTACTS

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GRIFFITHS ISLAND

SHEARWATER "MUTTON BIRD" COLONY

FoGI

MOYNE SHIRE

THE REMARKABLE MUTTON BIRD

The bird commonly called the "Mutton Bird" is the Short-tailed Shearwater *(Ardenna tenuirostris)*.

The Short-tailed Shearwater, is a member of a group of 60 medium to large seabirds in the family Procellaridae. This family includes species such as petrels, albatross and prions. All members of the family have tube-like nostrils on the top of their upper beak and are believed to be one of the few bird families with a well-developed sense of smell. Almost all breed in burrows and, like the albatrosses, are truly impressive oceanic fliers. It was given the name mutton bird by early settlers who utilised its fatty flesh for food and as an oil source. Today the bird is totally protected in Australia, although limited harvesting of the Shearwaters occurs on some Bass Strait islands.

The bird may be unspectacular in appearance, having a short tail with blackish brown feathers, but has some remarkable characteristics, including an annual migration around the Pacific Ocean, and an uncannily regular life cycle.

Adult Shearwaters on average weigh 550 grams with a wing span of 1 metre. Their beak is slender with a hook at the end to assist in catching their prey, as they skim along the surface of the water.

They are excellent swimmers, diving up to ten metres in search of prey such as krill, squid and small fish. The Short-tailed Shearwater is the only variety of petrel whose breeding grounds lie solely in Australia. Almost all colonies nest on islands off south east Australia, concentrated around Bass Strait. The birds occur in very large numbers, perhaps being Australia's most abundant bird. The colony at Griffiths Island alone totals between ten and twenty thousand individuals.

LIFECYCLE

from observations of Miss G. Bowker 1963 to 1973

Event	'Usual' date	Range
Arrival	22nd September	19th to 25th September
Departure after mating	12th November	9th to 13th November
'Honeymoon' at sea usually 13 days (from 11 to 15 days)		
Return for egg laying	25th November	22nd to 26th November
Adults depart	16th April	11th to 20th April
Young depart	3rd May	2nd to 9th May

Each year the bulk of the colony (the breeding age birds) return to the nesting grounds on almost the same day. Over a decade of observation, the Port Fairy birds returned within three days of the 22nd of September each year. Individuals return to the same nest burrow they occupied the previous year and generally mate with the same partner throughout their breeding life.

For the following few weeks, nest burrows are dug or cleared out. These burrows are tunnels about one metre long dug in soft sand, close under the surface.This results in nests difficult to avoid and easily crushed by walkers. Walkers should always keep to the official paths around the island to avoid nest damage.

MATING

Mating occurs in early November, with the entire population then flying off to sea for two weeks. This is known as the "honeymoon flight".

Eggs are laid immediately on return which is about the 25th of November. Each pair has one oval egg, similar in size to a domestic hen egg.

The male and female birds share the duty of incubation, with the male spending the first 12 to 14 days on the egg, followed by the female for 10 to 13 days. This alternating duty continues until the egg hatches about mid-January.

Two or three days after hatching, the chick is left during the day while the parents forage at sea for food, which is regurgitated to the youngster at night.

Progressively the periods between feeds increases until the chick can wait up to two weeks between meals. Parent birds can forage up to 1,500 kilometres from the nest during this period.

Meanwhile the chick gains weight rapidly and for a period becomes heavier than the adult birds.

In mid-April the adult birds begin their Pacific migration, leaving the young behind.

Hunger begins to bring chicks from the nest at night, until they eventually set off after the adults. Somehow they find the migratory route without the guidance of the older birds.

Mortality is high in the first year, with only about half of those which leave the nest surviving.

The non-breeding young birds follow a slightly later migratory timetable.

Reproductive maturity is attained after about 5 years of age.