

18. GEOGRAPHY AND ECOLOGY OF AFRICAN BANKS

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Introduction

The two small islands of African Banks are the most northerly of the Amirantes, and are situated on the eastern side of the Amirante Ridge (Baker 1963, 48-51). The ridge surface to the west carries 18-37 m of water. North Island, the larger of the two African Banks, is 275 m long and 45-90 m wide; South Island is 230 m long and 70 m wide. The islands are 2.9 km apart, and only South Island could be visited in 1968. The reef edge lies 450-800 m east of the cays; to the south and west there is a wide area of shoal water with reef patches.

The islands are much smaller, and presumably less stable, than others in the western Indian Ocean that have been considered in these reports. Horsburgh (1809, 127) reported that "they are almost overflowed at high water spring tides", and Coppinger (1883, 219) described one of them (?North Island) as a low flat elliptical cay, built of foraminiferal sand, with "upraised coral sandstone" at its northern end, "grooved and honeycombed into various fantastic shapes". Baker (1963, 50) mentions relict beachrock extending up to 1.1 km north of South Island, indicating considerable shifting of position.

Table 19 lists scientific visitors to the cays. Apart from H.M.S. Alert, all have been concerned with the bird fauna. The Percy Sladen Expedition did not call there.

Vegetation

The vegetation of South Island consists of scattered bushes of Tournefortia argentea, Suriana maritima and Scaevola taccada, all less than 2 m tall, with a single coconut and some gnarled trees of Tournefortia and a sparse and patchy ground cover of grasses, sedges, herbs and vines. Large areas of the ground are quite bare. On the seaward beach crest, which is subject to overtopping by waves, there is a patch of Paspalum distichum. The ground cover over the rest of the island consists of patches of two species of Portulaca (a small form, P. cf. australis, and a much larger fleshy form), Boerhavia repens, Tribulus cistoides, Achyranthes aspera, Sida parvifolia, the sedge Cyperus ligularis, and the grasses Dactyloctenium aegyptium and Lepturus

Table 19. Scientific studies at African Banks

<u>Date</u>	<u>Study</u>	<u>Reference</u>
1771	Survey by M. de la Biollière*	
1801	Wreck of H.M.S. <u>Spitfire</u>	
1821	Visit by H.M.S. <u>Menai</u> , Lt. Hay, to North Island	
1882	H.M.S. <u>Alert</u> , R. Coppinger, North Island: birds, general observations	Coppinger (1883); Coppinger and others (1884)
1937 Sept. 8, Nov.	D. Vesey-FitzGerald: sea birds	Vesey-FitzGerald (1941)
1955 July 5, Aug. 17	Viscount Ridley and Lord Richard Percy: sea birds	Ridley and Percy (1958)
1968 Sept. 26	M. E. D. Poore and D. R. Stoddart general observations, plant collection on South Island	This report

*Lionnet (this issue, Appendix) dates their discovery as 1797.

repens. Cassytha filiformis is widespread, and completely smothers some moribund Scaevola bushes at the southern end. The absence of Stachytarpheta may be remarked.

Coppinger (1883, 219), on the island he visited, mentions "scrubby grass and low bushes of the same character as those at Bird Island i.e. Tournefortia", with some juvenile Barringtonia but no other tree species.

Fauna other than Birds

The fauna of African Banks is dominated by birds and marine life; the islands are too small and ephemeral for any large land fauna to have established itself. The Alert collected 11 species of marine Mollusca (Smith 1884), two species of sponge (Ridley 1884), and two crabs, including Coenobita (Miers 1884). Horsburgh (1809, 127) said that African Banks "abound with turtle and aquatic birds, but are destitute of fresh water". Coppinger (1883, 219) found turtle nests but saw no turtle. He also mentions Ocypode. Rothschild (1915) stated that the Giant Land Tortoise was found on African Banks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but this is certainly an error, unless it refers to an occasional specimen landed from a passing ship.

Birds

The bird fauna is dominated by breeding colonies of terns, particularly Sooty Terns and Noddies.

Shore birdsArdea cinerea

Two nests in coconuts recorded on North Island by Ridley and Percy (1958, 17).

MigrantsArenaria interpres

Seen on South Island by Poore and Stoddart, September 1968.

Dromas ardeola

Seen on South Island by Poore and Stoddart, September 1968.

Sea birdsPhaethon aethereus

Sighted from ship off South Island by Poore and Stoddart, September 1968.

Sula sula

Unfledged gannets recorded by Coppinger (1883) and immature wanderers by Vesey-FitzGerald (1941) on 8 September 1937. Booby population said to be negligible by Ridley and Percy (1958).

Sterna dougallii

Breeds on North Island (Ridley and Percy 1958).

Sterna sumatrana

Collected by Coppinger in 1882 (Bowdler-Sharpe 1884, as *S. melanauchen*). Recorded as nesting on South Island (Vesey-FitzGerald 1941), and as breeding on North Island with a few pairs on South Island by Ridley and Percy (1958). Seen on South Island by Poore and Stoddart in 1968.

Sterna fuscata

Recorded as breeding by Vesey-FitzGerald (1941), and as breeding on North but no longer on South Island by Ridley and Percy (1958), who reported a total population of 43,300 in 1955. Breeding on South Island in large numbers in September 1968.

Sterna albifrons

Recorded by Vesey-FitzGerald (1941).

Thalasseus bergii

Breeding in November on North Island (Vesey-FitzGerald 1941), and again recorded as breeding on North Island by Ridley and Percy (1958). Present on South Island in September 1968.

Anous stolidus

Breeds on the ground with the Sooty Tern (Vesey-FitzGerald 1941). Breeds mainly on North Island, according to Ridley and Percy (1958), but 70 pairs of noddies nesting in bushes on South Island, total population 5900 in 1955. Present in large numbers on South Island in September 1968, mainly in trees and bushes, in contrast to the Sooty Tern which was mainly on the ground.

Anous tenuirostris

Breeding on South Island in September 1968, identified by head colour and by egg pattern, though difficult to distinguish when on the wing from A. stolidus. Nesting in a Scaevola bush.

Gygis alba

Seen at sea near South Island, probably a stray from Remire.

The sea bird colonies have been much affected by their proximity to Mahé, and the population has seriously declined in recent years. Ridley and Percy (1958) state that the egg export in 1931 was 2000 cases (1.4 million eggs), but that it had fallen by 1954 to 108 cases (75,600 eggs). The egg industry is now controlled by legislation in the Seychelles.

History and Settlement

The northern islands of the Amirantes were first surveyed in 1771 by M. de la Biollière. H.M.S. Spitfire was wrecked on South Island on 21 August 1801, and Lieut. Campbell went in a small boat to Mahé to seek help. He arrived there on 2 September, and the Spitfire's crew was rescued by H.M.S. Sybille.

It is unlikely that there has been any permanent settlement on either island. There is a small hut on South Island, used by fishermen and egg collectors, but no-one was living there in September 1968.

African Banks have formed part of the Colony of Seychelles since 1903, and were previously under the administration of Maritius.

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