

(ms. received 15.10.71)

NATURAL HISTORY OF CURTIS ISLAND, BASS STRAIT

1. INTRODUCTION

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This paper introduces a series concerned with the results of a scientific expedition undertaken between February 8 and 15, 1971, to Curtis Island, Bass Strait, Tasmania. Curtis Island, 166 hectares in area, is one of a number of granitic outcrops between Wilson's Promontory, which is located 41.8 km to the northwest of Curtis, and northern Tasmania (Rawlinson this volume, fig. 1). The three other islands in the Curtis Group are Cone Island, Passage Rock, and Sugarloaf, all of which are considerably smaller than Curtis and located to the south-southeast of Curtis.

There are no beaches on Curtis and the steep cliffs of the coastline afford no easy landing sites. There are two and possibly three landing sites on the north end and one of the southeast side (Kirkpatrick, Massey and Parsons this volume, fig. 1). However, landing may be further complicated or made virtually impossible by easterly or westerly winds creating a 1-1.5 m swell, which sweeps around the north end of the island. Landing by sea in other than a rubber landing craft is considered extremely difficult.

Curtis was known as "The Slipper" in early sailing days. Cliffs on the south end rise vertically 200-250 m and then gradually taper to a rounded summit at approximately 335m. A second peak with an elevation of approximately 224 m is located near the middle of the island and separated from the summit by a prominent saddle. From the second peak to the north end of the island, slopes and elevation gradually decrease. In general, steep slopes and a high mutton bird population have resulted in poor soil profile development and rapid downslope movement of soil particles. Vegetation consists primarily of *Poa poiformis* grassland and halophytic communities along the coastal margin. In addition, there are limited areas of *Melaleuca armillaris* closed forest located mainly on the higher portions and along the southeast side.

As no climatic data from Curtis are available, some from nearby stations are included (table 1) to assist interpretation of results reported in other papers of this series. The Deal Island figures probably give the best idea of rainfall on Curtis. Prevailing wind directions are likely to be mainly west and northwest as they are at Wilson's Promontory.

There is little history of landings on Curtis. Whitemark (*Sun News-Pictorial*, Melbourne, October 8, 1949) writes that "Curtis Island has known love before" and mentions a kidnapped Irish maid, who lived on Curtis with her daughter and was visited on at least one occasion by the Bishop of Tasmania, Bishop Montgomery. In 1959, F. Hall (pers. comm.) found remains of what was obviously the foundation line of a small stone shelter near his camp site (Kirkpatrick, Massey and Parsons this volume, fig. 1). Remains of another stone shelter were found in dense thicket at a higher elevation several hundred yards to the south of the first. These structures probably predate recent maroonings (see below) and could possibly be the work of sealers in the early 1800's or before.

In 1949 and again in 1954 maroonings on Curtis were reported ("Shipwrecked couple rescued on barren island after month's ordeal", *Argus*, Melbourne, September 19, 1949; "Maro men safe", *Sun News-Pictorial*, Melbourne, November 11, 1954). A more recent

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TABLE 1
CLIMATIC DATA FROM WILSON'S PROMONTORY AND DEAL ISLAND

	No. of Years Rec.	J.	F.	Mar.	A.	May	Jne.	Jly.	Aug.	S.	O.	N.	D.	Ann. Av.
A. a.	30	17	18	17	15	13	11	11	11	12	13	14	16	14
b.	30	48	54	63	83	98	119	104	106	93	83	68	60	979
B. b.	98	41	39	53	63	73	82	76	70	60	62	50	50	720

A. Wilson's Promontory; B. Deal Island

a. Av. daily mean temperature ($^{\circ}$ C).

b. Av. rainfall (mm).

landing in January, 1959, was accomplished by Fred Hall, a Melbourne architect and naturalist, who returned to Curtis with the expedition. A topographic survey team of two were landed on the summit by helicopter in late 1970 and remained on Curtis for several weeks. The February, 1971, expedition party consisted of the following members: Ian Abbott, ornithologist; John Brownlie, photographer and cook; Rex Filson, lichenologist; Fred Hall, naturalist; Robert King, algologist; Jamie Kirkpatrick, geographer; Jack Massey, geographer; Tim New, entomologist; Bob Parsons, botanist; Peter Rawlinson, herpetologist; Neville Rosengren, geologist; Eric Woodford, geologist. An account of the lichens of Curtis will appear subsequently.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Members of the expedition acknowledge gratefully donations by BHP and ESSO, as well as the loan of landing equipment by the Australian Army. Dr. Stephen Murray-Smith offered invaluable advice concerning landing and equipment, and provided material on the history of the Island. Many thanks to Frank Goold, captain of the *Majorie Phyllis*, who ferried us safely to and from Curtis. This was an expedition of the McCoy Society for Field Investigation and Research.