

HOW WE CAME TO COUNT TORRES STRAIGHT PIGEONS

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At our home in Southport in 1964 a friend Ed Gidney showed us his ‘Murray Views’ slides of a trip to North Queensland. Included was the photo that was to change our lives forever. It was taken from a hilltop showing silvery creeks winding through mangroves then across a channel to a large island.

“Where’s that?” we said.

Ed told us that a local policeman Westy Moller came from Cardwell, so Arthur went to see him and Westy gave Arthur his parents’ address in Cardwell. Following Eric Moller’s advice, by the Christmas holidays of that same year 1964, we were camped at Macushla on Hinchinbrook Island National Park.

On that beautiful calm day of 12 January 1965, from the hill of rocky Mona Islet we saw the islands of the Brook group—North, Tween, Middle and South. Arthur’s diary of this day recorded “Margaret said we could be there in half an hour”. That did it.

We scrambled down to our little tinnie *Tom Thumb* and as we approached North Brook Island, clouds of terns rose from the beach and as the afternoon passed, what seemed to be thousands of big white birds flew in. We drifted over the coral as we watched the birds, and then after this wonder-filled day, returned to Macushla in the moonlight.

We talked with local people who told us that the big white birds were Torres Strait or Nutmeg Pigeons, that the island used to be white with them, that they had been shot out and that it wasn’t worth going over for a shoot.

This surprised us as it seemed to us that there were thousands of them. We knew nothing about these pigeons—had never heard of them—so we found out what we could of these most beautiful of birds. In Spring the pigeons leave the Papua New Guinea lowlands and fly across Torres Strait to nest on the small island of the north

Australian coast—mostly of the north Queensland coast.

The small islands do not provide food for the many thousands of birds, so the parent birds on alternate days fly to the mainland to feed on the fruits of the forest there. When the single egg is hatched, the parent bird brings back food in its crop for the chick. By autumn the young have grown and they all fly back across the Strait to the lowland forests of Papua New Guinea.

This story is about the pigeons that fly to the Brook Islands, the largest colony south of Cairns.

For countless centuries before the first white settlers arrived in 1864 to establish the township of Cardwell, Aboriginal people only took what they needed of the Torres Strait Pigeons. There was no reason to kill any more. Aboriginal Elder Ernie Grant told us a name for the pigeons is Rook-a-yu.

We looked for earlier accounts of the pigeons from that time of white settlement. The first Sub-inspector of Police, Robert Johnstone, who was in the area from 1868-1889 wrote: “In fact in the season commencing about September the Nutmeg Pigeon is positively in millions... The noise of their cooing is so loud and in approaching an island at night it can be heard for miles... The nests are in tens of thousands in the trees, in the rocks, amongst the ferns and the eggs and young can be got in all stages and quantities”. He thought that “the decrease of Aborigines increased the numbers of mature birds and the numbers shot by parties from the mainland, pearl shellers and beche-de-mer men are not noticeable from the millions of birds in the flights from the mainland to the islands which can be witnessed any day”.

Johnstone described how the larder was replenished: “... a few shots are fired into what looks like a favourite tree for roosting,

long-range being selected. The flapping of wings is deafening joined with the cooing, and this is varied by the thud of the falling birds.....It is one of the most wonderful sights I ever saw, the innumerable flocks of pigeons all day and every day for months would convince anyone that the chance of the numbers decreasing must be a long way off” (*Spinifex and Wattle*).

Kendall Broadbent who survived the wreck of the *Maria* on Bramble Reef in 1872 returned to Cardwell in 1888-1889 as collector for the Queensland Museum (He collected a specimen of the glider forgotten for 100 years until Steve van Dyck searched for, refound and named the Mahogany Glider).

Broadbent wrote of the Torres Strait Pigeons “...up the Herbert, Murray and Tully and all the rivers that empty into Rockingham Bay these birds fly as far as the tops of the Coast Range scrubs”. On the river Murray they were in thousands... They broke down the high bushes of Brook Island with their weight” (*Emu*, vol X, 1910).

Author Edmund Banfield lived on Dunk Island from 1898 till his death there in 1923. He was appointed an Honorary Protector and loved and fiercely protected the pigeons from would-be shooters in that area. In his books he made heartfelt pleas for their survival: “Here we have the devastating effects of the interference of man. Congregating in large numbers on islands to nest, and only to nest, these birds make quite charming sport to men with guns... Big and white they are the easiest of all shooting—a whole season’s natural increase may be discounted in an afternoon’s wretched sport” (*Last Leaves from Dunk Isle*, 1925).

In 1909, before the advent of rail, Sub-inspector of Customs Alfred Searcy wrote of passing down the Barrier Reef and of the Torres Strait Pigeons: “Steamers are frequently stopped to give passengers a chance of making a bag. I was one of a party on one

occasion and we shot a great number of birds” (*Australian Tropics*).

By 1917 naturalists HG Barnard and AJ Campbell were expressing concern. Though they wrote “it is an inspiring sight to witness the flocks of these black and white birds, in strings, flying between the islands and the mainland” they added “all islands should be protected against the pot-hunting sportsmen or else the fine Nutmeg Pigeon will soon become like the famous Passenger Pigeon of America, extinct” (*Emu*, 2 July 1917). The last Passenger pigeon whose vast numbers once darkened the skies, died in a cage in Cincinnati Zoo at 1pm on 1 September 1914. This lonely sad bird had died only three years earlier and this would have been on their minds.

Their fears were confirmed for Barnard later wrote: “these birds were once seen in thousands on the northern coast but now, alas, they have dwindled until now very few remain. Though on the list of protected birds, and their breeding islands have been declared sanctuaries, they are shot in scores by shooting parties and so the young are left to perish on the nest. Only small flocks were seen about the Murray and their loud coo was seldom heard” (*Emu*, 1 July, 1926). Less than forty years before, Broadbent had referred to the thousands on the river Murray.

In World War Two—in January, March and April of 1944—with Britain and to a lesser extent USA, secret experiments of bombing with mustard gas were held on North Brook Island. Australian Army volunteers who took part, wearing some protective clothing, were badly affected and for many years recognition of their service has been sought. There does not seem to be any mention of Torres Strait Pigeons or other wildlife, but the experimental effects on goats was: “...the distressed bleating of mustard gas-exposed goats, blinded, lungs scarred and in pain” was summarised as due to mustard gas (*Keen as Mustard*, Bridget Goodwin UQP 1998).

Back to 1965: On our return to Brisbane, as members of the newly formed Gold Coast Hinterland branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) we had come to know Charlie Roff, Chief Fauna Officer of the Department of Primary Industries (and the only one for the state), Conservator of the National Parks branch of Forestry Alan Trist, Secretary Bill Wilkes and Sid Curtis.

Charlie didn't know a great deal about the pigeons and in another life-changing moment, said the only way to find out about the numbers and the shooting was to count the pigeons and could we do that for ten years? We said yes, it was too good a chance to miss doing something useful though it meant a thousand mile drive. Charlie gave us DPI Sanctuary notices to put up.

On our return north in the same year, December 1965, we made our first counts on North Brook Island. The one on 19 December, of 3,342, was not finished because of bad weather, but on 5 January 1966 it was 4,692.

We returned north again in December 1966 and came across a big recent pile of feathers on North Brook Island. The count was 4,160 on 18 December 1966.

Cut timber from shipwrecks had been washed up on the 8 kilometre beach of Ramsay Bay on Hinchinbrook Island so we selected a suitable length and put up one of Charlie's Sanctuary notices on North Brook on 27 December 1966. A camper of a group who visited the Brook at that time told us they had seen the notice that the Island was a sanctuary, decided not to have a shoot but "to leave the poor buggers alone".

We were given a large National Park sign by the National Parks section of Forestry and placed one on North Brook the next year on 28 August 1967 (we occasionally came up on the August school holidays as well). But when we returned only a few months later

in December 1967, despite the Sanctuary notice and the National Park sign, there was evidence of a very big shoot—spent cartridge cases, empty cartridge cartons, feathers, beer bottles. At that period feathers at intervals marked high tide on the 8km beach of Ramsay Bay.

We were told 1,100 birds had been taken by shooters from Ingham on that day of shooting and the name of the main shooter, and that sugar bags were used to take the birds back to friends. People who had arrived at the Brook a month before us said they had boiled the billy on about three dozen empty cartridge cartons. The highest count for 1967 was 3,024 on 20 December 1967.

In September 1968 the DPI issued a Press Statement quoting the Minister Mr John Rowe that no sympathy would be shown to anyone found destroying the protected Torres Strait Pigeon.

On our next trip north in 1968, the count had fallen to 1,451 on 17 December. This fall would appear to have been caused by the big shoot of the previous year.

There was a spell of beautiful weather later that month and we spent a pleasant day beachcombing, finding a padded chair seat on Shepherd Bay beach—not really much use for this, but nevertheless it was put onboard. We found the chair frame on Ramsay Bay beach and put the two together.

A few days later on 29 December 1968 the weather that morning stayed equally beautiful so we set off for the Brooks. Others took advantage of the weather as well for as we approached we heard gunshots and as we got closer empty blue cartridge cartons floated by.

As it was the year before, the Sanctuary notice, National Park sign both placed in prominent positions and also the DPI Press Statement had been ignored. We landed and saw a big pile of

cartridges in the dip of the coral shingle of the spit, ready for the intended later afternoon shoot of the returning birds. The shooters were obviously confident they wouldn't be disturbed.

Arthur walked down the beach to where three young men were emerging from the forest. No dead birds, one gun fitted for silencer, a pigeon feather on one gun. Arthur took the guns and the names of the men. One name was the same as that connected with the shoot of the previous year. At that moment Vic McCristal and a friend arrived, witnessed what was happening and continued on to the reef.

Arthur came back to the boat, we had lunch and as we were preparing to leave, four other men arrived back from fishing and were furious, using extremely strong language (obscene) to express what they thought about interfering southerners. The cache of ammunition had vanished.

Arthur took the guns and statements to Lofty, the surprised local policeman in Cardwell who was not used to people bringing him guns. We advised the National Parks section of Forestry and Charlie Roff. The incident became well known in the Ingham area, where we were told that the word was that the case wouldn't even get to court. However there was still legislation banning the carrying of firearms on a Sunday. So that was the charge that could be proven. It did go to court and small fines were imposed.

There were strong articles in local newspapers about the need to protect the Torres Strait Pigeons. Shooting of the pigeons petered out after this with one shoot of about 200 and other smaller ones until around 1974. As well, the DPI for some years continued each September to issue press statements that no sympathy would be shown to anyone destroying the protected Torres Strait Pigeons.

From the early days people who were concerned for the pigeons, fearing they may meet the same fate as the Passenger Pigeon, pressed for laws to protect the Torres Strait Pigeon. Obviously unknown to most people, already there was legal protection from October to March under the *Native Bird Protection Act* proclaimed in 1887 with exemptions for Aboriginal people taking pigeons for their own food and for farmers seeking bona fide protection of their crops. Protection was made stronger when all islands which formed part of the state of Queensland were declared sanctuaries. Sad to say, no-one seemed aware of this wise legislation or if they were, the legislation was ignored.

Worst of all, as Banfield had written “the pigeons were congregating to nest and only to nest” and the unwritten law that nesting birds were not harmed was forgotten.

In Cardwell the small National Parks section of Forestry didn't have a boat and Brian Jacobson, a staff member who did have one was relied on for occasional patrols. On 10 January 1970 Brian brought Norm Clough and Bill Fisher, picking up Arthur and me from Macushla across to North Brook to see how the counts were done. There was the usual lull earlier in the afternoon until after 5pm when the bird numbers increased, confirming what Norm had been told. Because of time limits we stopped at 6pm when the count was 1,742. The highest count for that season (1969/ 70) was 4,151.

In 1972 Don Duffy, boat skipper and in charge, brought the first National Parks boat Gannet from Brisbane to Cardwell and this was the beginning of surveillance of the islands.

Things changed for us too in 1972. We loved the islands and the north and Eric Moller introduced us to his friend Joe Clift who sold us land trusting us not to clear it. We first had it declared a fauna sanctuary, and were then able to add it to Edmund Kennedy National Park.

The situation also became better for wildlife conservation when in 1975 the Fauna Branch of DPI and the National Parks section of Forestry were combined to form the National Parks and Wildlife Service (QNPWS). With more appointments at last there was enough staff to care for the parks and to enforce legislation.

In 1975 it was also the pigeons' and our good fortune to meet John Winter the newly appointed senior zoologist with QNPWS in North Qld. As well, in 1975 it was the end of Charlie Roff's 10 years of counts. These showed that despite that last big shoot in 1967 the numbers increased from 4,691 to 9,556 in 1975. We asked John Winter's advice and it was that the counts were so important that they should go on "forever". And so they do continue.

From 1965 we had followed a very simple method of recording numbers of pigeons—on pieces of paper, an old Christmas card, a notebook and the backs of envelopes—before entering them in a Queensland Education Department exercise book. Undeniably accurate but some room for improvement. John tactfully set up a more systematic way of recording the counts including dividing the counts into 15-minute blocks and the counts, with John's supervision and advice, continue in a professional and efficient way.

Counting of the pigeons returning in the afternoon from the mainland is done on the Spit, the north-west tip of North Brook Island's coral shingle beach. If terns are nesting there, counts are made from the boat anchored a little way out. Starting at 3.30pm the counts last until dark.

At first there are very few, numbers increasing slowly until 5.30 or 6pm when numbers increase greatly and lessen as the day darkens. There were so few birds in the early days that counting was not difficult and the two of us did it easily—one facing north the other

south—with time to count and write the numbers down. We made as many counts as possible each year, the December one being the most important as it is usually the highest. Since 1975, counts have been made in October, November and December. A count is made in the New Year when possible and occasionally is higher than in December. Over the years, as the numbers increased more people were needed and became involved, one person counting and calling the numbers while another (a scribe) wrote down the numbers. Numbers were usually added up in the next day or so, names of counters, scribes and other participants are recorded and John's system continues.

Earlier, Arthur and I decided we needed a graph so Arthur ruled up a large sheet of blue cardboard with columns and dates for numbers and this illustrates very clearly the fluctuation of numbers over the years. It took 29 years from 1965 to reach 30,000 birds at which stage I had to glue on another sheet of blue cardboard and paint more pigeons on it. In the main, after that the counts reached and stayed around 30,000 when on 29 December 1994, 45,134 were counted. On 18 December 2008 there were 47,168. Excessive rain in 2010 caused poor fruiting and though 28,861 were counted on 17 November 2010, pigeons left early and instead of going up in December the count dropped to 9,967 on 15 December 2010.

In the next year on 11 February 2011, Cyclone Yasi destroyed the fruit of the forest and the pigeon numbers dropped to 5,311 on 14 December 2011. With fair fruiting in 2012, there was a rise to 21,088 and by 12 December 2013 the count was 22,494 with a drop to 18,076 on 18 December 2014.

In the 1980s when we continued using our bigger tinnie *Seabird*, then sailing boat with in-board motor *Wayamba*, National Parks became more involved and volunteers enjoyed the extra space and comfort of the barge *Gannet*.

Mourned and loved by all who knew him, Arthur died in January 1991. His memory is celebrated by naming the trail on Hinchinbrook Island for him and also a small bay on the Island.

National Parks took over completely and the counts continued with David Green organising them each year. It was always a delight for the regular volunteers to receive an official Departmental letter stating “once again it is my joyful task of assisting in organising the Pied Imperial Pigeon survey...”. Dave’s enthusiasm, love of the pigeons, love of his work and kind heart ensured that happy useful days’ work continued.

Dave’s discarded gauze window screens were placed under trees favoured for nesting. The excreted seeds were collected and given to native plants nurseries, first to the QPWS nursery at Lake Eacham, then to the C4 nursery at Mission Beach, then to the Council nursery at Tully and now to the Girringun nursery at Cardwell where they are also included in revegetation and are available for planting on private land.

Much loved, there was great sadness when Dave Green died in 2012. He is sadly missed.

The counts continued with Julie Russell organising them until Emma Schmidt with the same love of her work, the pigeons and the islands was appointed.

Margaret Thorsborne, 2015
