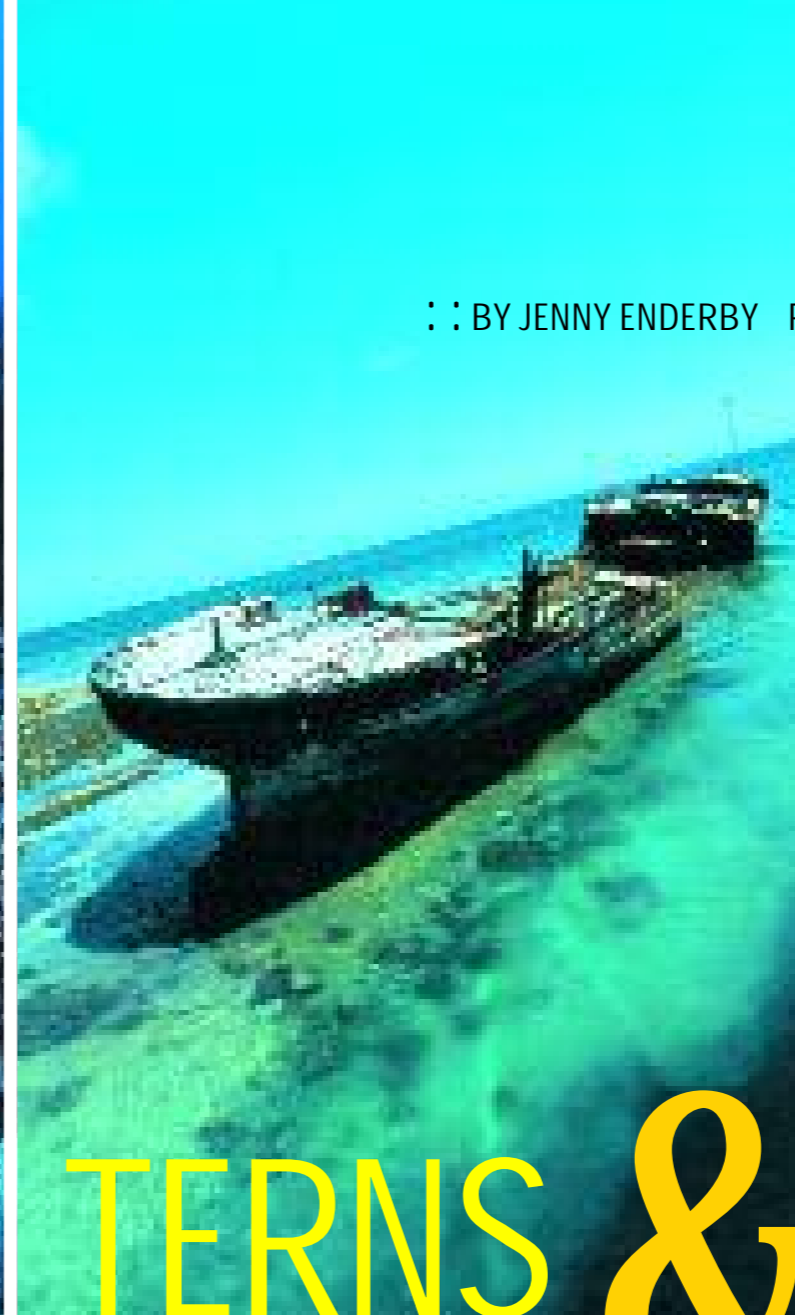


BY JENNY ENDERBY PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY AND JENNY ENDERBY



A GREEN TURTLE LOOKS UP FROM ITS RESTING PLACE AMONGST THE HARD CORALS. IT DOESN'T MOVE, MERELY WATCHES. EIGHTY YEARS AGO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IN DANGER – A TURTLE SOUP FACTORY HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED HERE IN THE 1920S, BUT LUCKILY TURTLE SOUP DIDN'T CATCH ON AND IT CLOSED DOWN FOUR YEARS LATER. HERON ISLAND IS NOW A NATIONAL PARK AND ITS SURROUNDING REEF IS A FULLY PROTECTED MARINE SANCTUARY AND EACH NOVEMBER HUNDREDS OF TURTLES LUMBER ASHORE HERE TO LAY THEIR EGGS.

# HERONS, TERNS & TURTLES



The gentle current carries us along the wall of coral and thoughts of turtles disappear as the unmistakable shapes of a dozen sharks move slowly past out in the blue. They vanish behind a wall of fish, then a massive cow-tailed ray moves in like a two metre wide flying saucer. The action is heating up.

A large manta ray moves in, its four metre wingspan like an acrobatic aircraft – our first manta encounter. The next one is seconds later as another monster cruises in off the reef. For a few minutes the pair swirl towards the surface then vanish down the reef edge, reappearing from a different angle. They enjoy our bubbles caressing their undersides as they sweep through. A couple more passes and they vanish down the reef into the depths. At the edge of visibility are thousands of fish but the shark shapes have gone. A school of metre-long cobia move in and race past. These famed tropical predators check us out, then

Clownfish amongst anemone tentacles • Green turtle • Wreck of the Protector at the entrance to Heron harbour • Open polyps of a soft coral • School of snapper .



“ HOW CAN WE LOOK FOR NUDIBRANCHS AND OTHER SMALL STUFF WHEN THERE'S SO MUCH BIG ACTION OUT IN THE BLUE? ”

speed away, scattering the fish schools. Another turtle sits on the top of a coral bommie, ignoring us while we shuffle around it with our cameras. Every bommie has a few large coral trout and plenty of other fish nearby. Surely the recent increase in totally protected areas in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park will ensure that more reefs become or stay as good as this one!

How can we look for nudibranchs and other small stuff when there's so much big action out in the blue? We force ourselves to stop for a clownfish or two before another turtle sculls in for a look, then retreats over the reeftop. The action continues for 45 minutes before we surface. One divemaster grumbles about the 21 degree C water as we climb on board, but to us the temperature is pleasantly tropical. Manta rays are the hot topic of discussion on the boat.

The wreck of the *Protector* looms as we enter the Heron harbour. It was one of the first Australian Navy ships, serving until 1943, then dropped as a breakwater at Heron Island. Several

smaller cousins of the manta rays swim nearby; these long-nosed eagle rays are common close to the beach and under the wharf.

After a quick camera reload we head for the Bommie. Again the fish life is prolific and again it's big. As we reach the bommie, the fish schools are forgotten as another huge manta ray appears from the depths heading towards us. With one eye on the distant blue we meander across the staghorn coral forest. Schools of smaller fish dart into the safety of the coral as we pass. Each underhang has its own resident coral trout or similar large predator. Giant clams are common too, some up to half a metre across with glowing mantles in brown, green and blue. But just when we settle in to study the fish, corals and clams, another manta appears.

A turtle resting on the reef stops us. Around some of the bommies schools of snappers, sweetlips and emperors hang in the gentle current. Move too close, they open up and swarm around the bommie; move away and they reform as

As the tide drops a guided group head out to view the marine life armed with underwater viewers.

One of Heron Island's excellent dive boats at the wharf.

A school of yellow tail fusiliers.

Bottom left: The gantry was used for unloading goods onto the island.



they were. Schools of yellow-tailed fusiliers and snappers pass continuously along with hundreds of small baitfish. A couple of bommie tops are home to large anemones, each with resident clownfish of varied colours and patterns.

After 45 minutes we return to the dive boat; birds flutter overhead as we head back for a shower and a feed. Next day we find out more about the Heron birdlife on a guided walk around the island. Our guide covers each of the species and also the trees they nest in. One, the pisonia, has a special relationship with noddy terns and about half the Great Barrier Reef's pisonias are found on Heron Island. By the time

the tour's over we've added a couple more species of tern, a frigate bird and discovered the grey and white herons are the same species!

At sunset we watch small blacktip reef sharks and rays mooching in the shallows and the snorkellers seem blissfully unaware of their half-metre companions. The sun glows gold behind the weathered old wooden gantry, once used for unloading goods. A heron hunts the edge of the reef, picking up crabs and fish from the pools. It's unconcerned by our presence, as though the island is its own. Maybe Heron Island is the right name for one of the Great Barrier Reef's special places.

**H**eron Island, at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef on the Tropic of Capricorn, was first visited by the survey ships *HMS Fly* and *Bramble* in 1843. The onboard geologist Joseph Jukes named the island after the large number of reef herons. The next visitors in 1910 were from the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. They noted 'virtually inexhaustible' natural resources in the area and the prolific bird life on Heron and other Capricorn Group islands. On nearby Tern Island thousands of brown noddy terns still fly, roost on or walk around the island. Both white and grey herons perch and nest in the trees.

Heron is one of only three coral cays in Queensland with a resort. The Heron Island catamaran transfer departs Gladstone for the two-hour/72 kilometre trip and helicopter transfers are also available giving stunning views of offshore reefs. The Marine Centre has good quality dive and snorkeling gear for hire and several boats to transfer guests to adjacent reefs. Discover Scuba, Refresher and Referral Courses are available, plus snorkelling lessons. The resort has a long-term commitment to conservation and supports eco-tours which include reef walks, bird walks, round-the-island walks, snorkelling tours and night starwatching. Heron is only 1.8 kilometres in circumference and usually has sheltered snorkeling off a beach regardless of weather conditions.

Check out Heron Island Resort website for more information: [www.heronisland.com](http://www.heronisland.com)

Tony and Jenny Enderby travelled courtesy of Queensland Tourism/Heron Island Resort.



A huge manta ray moves past above me. Batfish comes close to check me out. A reef heron patiently waits on the rocks hunting for small fish. A Queensland grouper rests in a ledge under the coral reef