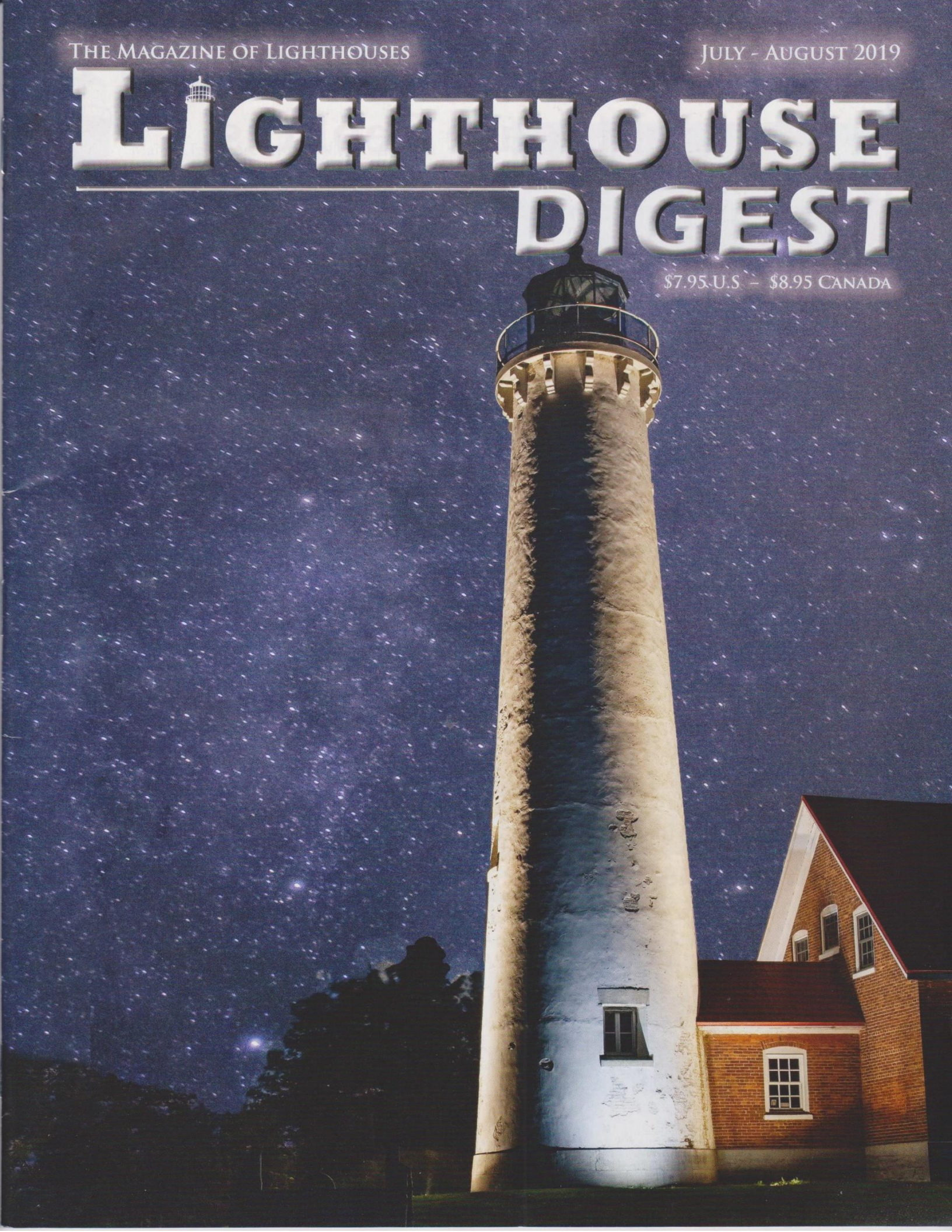


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# LIGHTHOUSE DIGEST

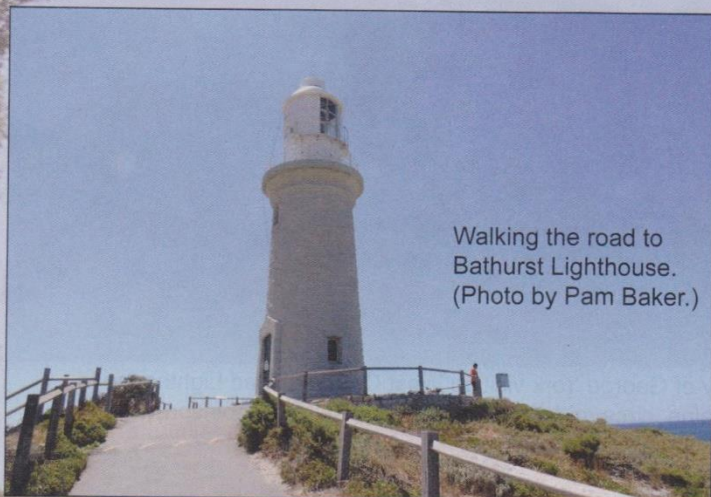
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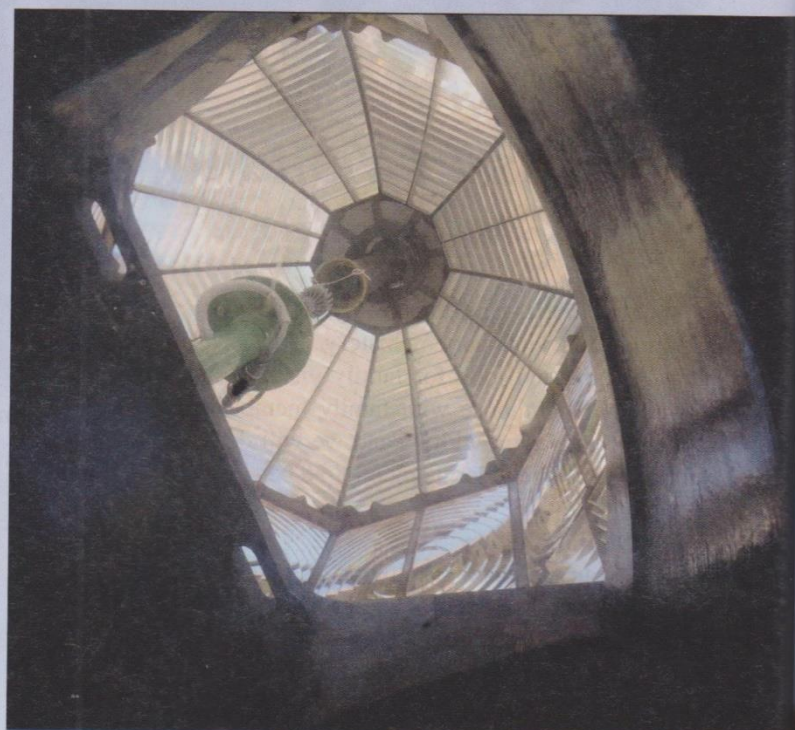


# Australia's Rottnest Island Lighthouses: From Warning to Welcoming

By Gary Baker



Walking the road to  
Bathurst Lighthouse.  
(Photo by Pam Baker.)



Looking up  
into the lens of  
the Wadjemup  
Lighthouse. (Photo  
by Pam Baker.)

Rottnest Island, off the coast of Western Australia, is known for its population of quokkas. Dubbed “the happiest animal on earth,” these friendly pint-sized marsupials are found everywhere on the island. But when Dutch explorers arrived here in 1696, they mistook the quokkas for rats and named the island “Rats Nest” or Rottnest.

Today, Rottnest Island is a much-loved vacation spot with its own welcoming committee of cute and trusting quokkas. The island is now a nature reserve with spectacular white sandy beaches, secluded bays, and unique wildlife, but it wasn't always so welcoming.



A quokka  
welcomes  
visitors to  
Rottnest  
Island.  
(Courtesy  
Western  
Australia  
Tourism.)

Rottnest boasts a captivating history with its 13 shipwrecks—enough to warrant the building of two fascinating lighthouses: Wadjemup Lighthouse, located in the center of Rottnest Island and Bathurst Lighthouse, situated on the island's northeast coast, that serves as the rear light. The flashing beacons of these two island lighthouses, working in tandem, have traditionally provided navigational triangulation to help ships stay clear of the treacherous Kingston Reef.

## Wadjemup: Rottnest Island's First Lighthouse

In the late 1830s, the British established a colony in the Swan River region of Western Australia. Shipping was the primary means for supplying the colony and communicating with the other colonies in Australia and the world.

The largest and northernmost island near Fremantle—the colony's historically important and busy commercial shipping port—Rottnest functioned as the first warning site for ships looking for safe entry to the mouth of the Swan River.

In 1842, the government started building a lighthouse in the center of Rottnest Island on the highest point located three miles inland. Prisoners incarcerated on the island dug and laid the foundation. Constructed of limestone from local quarries, the Wadjemup Lighthouse took nine years to construct. In 1851, the light was fitted and officially opened, coinciding with the 22nd anniversary of the Swan River Colony's founding.

To differentiate from fires lit by the natives to rouse game, the light was given a green tinge. Interestingly, the lamps originally burned coconut oil, but changed to colza oil in 1862 and eventually utilized kerosene later in the century.

The first lighthouse keeper was Thomas Carter. He was replaced by Samuel Duffield in 1854 who held the position for 28 years. Wadjemup Lighthouse was the first stone lighthouse in Western Australia.

Despite the warning beacon shining from Rottnest Island, seven ships were wrecked off-shore on the unseen Kingston Reefs between 1878 and 1891.



Taller than its predecessor by 19 meters, this second Wadjemup Lighthouse housed Australia's first rotating beacon. A new mercury float-type pedestal and clockwork revolving mechanism was fitted in 1929 and the light was electrified in 1936. It currently has eight flashes every 60 seconds. From its 80-meter elevation above sea level, the most powerful light on Rottnest Island can still reach ships 27 nautical miles away. Although the 38-meter tower has been unmanned since becoming automated in 1986, the historic assistant lighthouse keeper's residence is still there.

Volunteer docents offer guided lighthouse tours daily providing visitors an opportunity to hear stories of the shipwrecks, view an impressive museum collection of lighthouse lenses and interpretive displays, and experience the inside of a working lighthouse. Visitors can climb 155 steps to the top for a breathtaking 360-degree view of the island and sweeping vistas of the sapphire Indian Ocean.

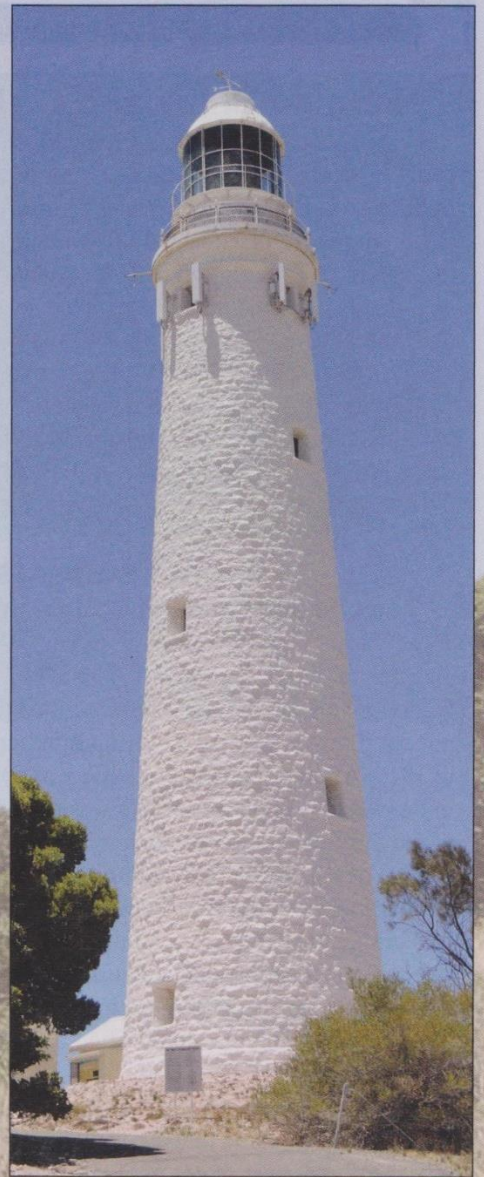
Today, the Wadjemup Lighthouse continues to operate with its neighbor, Bathurst Lighthouse, situated northeast across the island on Bathurst Lookout Point, overlooking Thomson Bay.

#### **Bathurst: Rottnest Island's Second Lighthouse**

Completed in 1900, the Bathurst Lighthouse's lantern originally featured a fixed white light. This was changed to a flashing light when it was automated in 1920. Its current character has four flashes every 16 seconds. Bathurst has a white limestone conical shaped tower with a balcony and lantern with a golden dome. Smaller than the rebuilt Wadjemup at only 19.2 meters, its overall elevation is 30 meters above sea level.

With a range of 14 nautical miles, Bathurst Lighthouse completed the critical triangulation link for ships to make safe passage to Fremantle Port. Although closed to visitors, Bathurst is a great spot to capture beautiful sunsets over the Rottnest Island's famous Pinky Beach.

In 1915, the Australian federal government proclaimed the Lighthouses Act which made the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service responsible for



Close up view of the Wadjemup Lighthouse. (Photo by Pam Baker.)

When the City of York, a British vessel carrying timber, sank off the island's coast in 1899 with the loss of 11 lives, the tragedy spurred plans to replace the original Wadjemup Lighthouse with a taller one and build a secondary lighthouse to improve maritime safety.

The second Wadjemup Lighthouse, built in the same location as the first and established in 1896, ranks currently as Western Australia's fourth oldest extant lighthouse and is perhaps the fairest of the many lights dotting Western Australia's coast. This remarkable white-washed, white-roofed sentinel draws thousands of admirers each year to Wadjemup Hill.

establishing and maintaining lighthouses, lightships, beacons and buoys.

Although the Rottnest Island's lighthouses are now automated, they remain an integral part of Australia's navigation network and are operated by the Australian Maritime Authority, which completely encircles the nation's coastline.

Today, ironically, Rottnest Island is no longer a foreboding warning to visitors, passenger ferries, and ships at sea. Due to the protection provided by the two lighthouses, Rottnest Island is a welcoming adventure for tourists and lighthouse aficionados alike.