PLEASE:

Do not disturb our breeding seabirds – if you find a bird on a nest watch quietly from a respectful distance. Pay close attention to the bird’s behaviour; if it alters in any way as you approach stop and move carefully away from the nest. In particular we ask that you avoid approaching any groups of frigatebirds perched on the ground as they may be nesting and are very easily disturbed, which may have a negative outcome for the nest and the recovery of the species.

Report any unusual sightings – Occasionally vagrants will turn up on the island - amongst the most common are swifts and waders such as sanderling. We would be interested in the species, number and location of any sightings you may make during your stay on the island. If you are unsure what you have seen please write or draw a description of the bird(s) or take a photograph and we will try to help make an identification.

Report ringed birds – A number of the seabirds on the island have been ringed with a metal ring issued by the British Trust for Ornithology to identify individual birds. Some birds may also carry one or more plastic coloured rings. If you see a dead or live bird with a ring on it please let us know the location and the ring combination it was carrying. Handling of birds should only be carried out by those licensed to do so on Ascension Island.

Report injured birds – If you find an injured bird please report it to the Conservation Department.

Image Credits
Ascension Island Conservation Department, Nicola Weber, Sam Weber, David Higgins, Anselmo Pelembe, Derren Fox, Alan Marsh, Roger Dickey

Front page image: A male endemic frigatebird inflating his gular pouch during mating season
Ascension Island is the most important seabird breeding site in the tropical Atlantic and is one of the most important warm-water seabird stations in the world.

It supports 11 species of breeding seabird, including the endemic Ascension Island frigatebird and the Atlantic’s largest nesting population of sooty terns.

The present seabird population is thought to be only a fraction of what it was prior to man’s colonisation of the island in 1815, when there are estimated to have been millions of seabirds nesting in large colonies on the mainland.

The introduction of cats to Ascension Island in the 1800s led to rapid population declines of seabirds nesting on the mainland. The relatively small surviving populations were limited to inaccessible cliff ledges and offshore stacks, the largest of which is Boatswainbird Island.

In 2001, a feral cat control programme was initiated and the island was declared feral cat free in 2006. Seabird recolonisation of accessible mainland sites was first recorded in May 2002 and numbers have increased steadily since. The first species to recolonise were masked booby, brown booby, brown noddie and white-tailed tropicbird. However, it took ten years for Ascension’s endemic frigatebird to return to nest on the mainland, with the first two mainland nests found in 2012. The numbers nesting on the mainland have increased to 12 in 2013 and 44 in 2014 and hopefully will continue to increase.
Visitors to Ascension may observe the following species, depending on conditions and the time of year:

**Ascension frigatebird (Fregata aquila)**

Endemic to Ascension, this distinctive seabird with long wings and a deeply forked tail is most often observed in flight. Their plumage is predominantly black, with the exception of a pale morph that has a white belly, and juveniles that have a white head and belly. Frigatebirds are highly adapted to an aerial lifestyle, they are very light for their size and fly very efficiently using an aerial lifestyle; they are very light for their size and fly very efficiently using aerial plumage with a deeply forked tail. They are most often observed in flight above the island, particularly during the breeding season. They are also relatively commonly seen diving around the island every 9.6 months to breed in vast numbers on the Wideawake fairs at Mars Bay and Waterside. In recent years, this pattern seems to be altering with an increasing proportion of the year in smaller numbers, particularly in breeding season. They often follow visitors, particularly during walks around Green Mountain and off Middleton’s Path. This species tends to remain close to the island all year round and these birds can often be seen in pairs performing synchronised aerobatics.

**Best places to see:** Green Mountain or Razor’s Edge and Letterbox.

**Yellow-billed tropicbirds (Phaethon lepturus)** and **red-billed tropicbirds (Phaethon aethereus)**

Both of these species can most easily be seen in flight, their strikingly elongated central tail feathers and court calls make them easily identifiable. Tropicbirds are mostly white with a black eye stripe. The more common yellow-billed tropicbird is smaller, more delicate and is mostly white with prominent diagonal black bars on the wings. In contrast, the red-billed tropicbird has fine black barring on its back. These hole nesting species are often easy to miss when scanning as cliffs as all that is visible is the long tail streamers.

**Best places to see:** Northwest coast and Boatswainbird Island.

**White tern (Gygis alba)**

These small, white, inquisitive terns, locally referred to as terry terns, will often follow visitors, particularly during walks around Green Mountain and off Middleton’s Path. This species tends to remain close to the island all year round and these birds can often be seen in pairs performing synchronised aerobatics.

**Best places to see:** Green Mountain or Razor’s Edge and Letterbox.

**Brown noddy (Anous stolidus)**

This brown noddy is notably larger than the darker black noddy and the pale forked and crown of the black noddy is more pronounced. Brown noddies nest singularly or in small colonies on rocky outcrops around the coast while black noddies are restricted to remote cliffs on Boatswainbird Island and the Letterbox Peninsula.

**Best places to see:** Brown noddies can sometimes be seen nesting at the Wideawake fairs but are most numerous on offshore stacks and the adjacent coastline of the western peninsula. Black noddies can be observed at Pillar Bay or around Letterbox.

**Sooty tern (Onychoprion fuscatus)**

Sooty terns have black plumage on their backs and white underneath, with a deeply forked tail. They are locally known as Wideawake because of their loud call, which means they will often be heard before they are seen, particularly in breeding season. They nest colonially, historically returning to the island every 9 to 12 months to breed in vast numbers on the Wideawake fairs at Mars Bay and Waterside. In recent years, this pattern seems to be altering with birds nesting at the fairs for a larger proportion of the year in smaller numbers but with a pronounced peak every 9 to 12 months. In collaboration with the Army Ornithological Society and the University of Birmingham, the Conservation Department monitors their numbers each season and a recent project has allowed their movements at sea to be tracked.

**Best places to see:** Mars Bay (during breeding season). Please check in at the Conservation Office for information about their current breeding status and for information on access to Mars Bay.

**Soody tern (Onychoprion fuscatus)**

Sooty terns have black plumage on their backs and white underneath, with a deeply forked tail. They are locally known as Wideawake because of their loud call, which means they will often be heard before they are seen, particularly in breeding season. They nest colonially, historically returning to the island every 9 to 12 months to breed in vast numbers on the Wideawake fairs at Mars Bay and Waterside. In recent years, this pattern seems to be altering with birds nesting at the fairs for a larger proportion of the year in smaller numbers but with a pronounced peak every 9 to 12 months. In collaboration with the Army Ornithological Society and the University of Birmingham, the Conservation Department monitors their numbers each season and a recent project has allowed their movements at sea to be tracked.

**Best places to see:** Letterbox Peninsula; brown and masked boobies are also relatively commonly seen flying off English Bay.

**Masked booby (Sula dactylatra)**

Brown booby (Sula leucogaster)

Red-footed booby (Sula sula)

These three species of booby nest around Ascension. The largest and most numerous is the Masked booby, predominantly white with black trailing edges to the wings and tail. The white morph of the red-footed booby can look similar at a distance to the masked booby but has a white-tail, whilst the brown morph is easily distinguished from the other booby species. Brown boobies are the smallest of the three species with brown plumage and a white belly. Each species prefers different nesting habitats. Masked boobies nest predominantly on the plateaus of Boatswainbird and the Letterbox Peninsula whilst brown boobies prefer cliff tops and coastal rocks. Red footed boobies nest in small numbers on the numerous stacks and inaccessible cliffs. All three species display an impressive diving behaviour in order to obtain food. While most of their foraging is carried out a long way offshore, brown boobies in particular may be observed diving around the coast when schools of fry aggregate to stores.

**Best places to see:** Letterbox Peninsula; brown and masked boobies are also relatively commonly seen flying off English Bay.

**Red-footed booby (Sula sula)**