



ASCENSION ISLAND

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

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Front page image: A male endemic frigatebird inflating his gular pouch during mating season

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ASCENSION ISLAND

SEABIRDS OF ASCENSION ISLAND





SEABIRDS

OF ASCENSION ISLAND

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.

SEABIRD RESTORATION PROJECT

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 noddy 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.



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SIGHTINGS

EASY TO SEE ● HARDER TO FIND ● NOCTURNAL ●

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 thermals to soar over vast distances. Their plumage is not waterproof so they never land on the ocean but instead use their aerial agility to pluck food from the surface of the ocean or steal (kleptoparasitise) from other seabirds. The downside of adaptation to life on the wing is that they have very short legs suited more to perching than walking even short distances.

The Ascension frigatebird predominantly nests on Boatswainbird Island, with a few additional nests to be found on the adjacent Letterbox peninsula. Males attract females to mate with by inflating their large red throat pouch and vibrating their wings. Females lay a single white egg on the ground, with only a few feathers or pieces of vegetation to mark the nest.

Best places to see: Frigatebirds can be seen flying above most of the coastal areas of the island, often present at Long Beach during turtle season or in larger numbers toward Hummock Point commuting to and from Boatswainbird Island and the Letterbox Peninsula.

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

Both of these species can most easily be seen in flight; their strikingly elongated central tail feathers and loud calls make them easily identifiable. Tropicbirds are mostly white with a black eye stripe. The more common yellowbilled 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 a cliff as all that is visible is the long tail streamers.

Best places to see: Northwest coast and Boatswainbird Island.

Band-rumped storm petrel (*Oceanodroma sp.*) ●

The smallest breeding seabird on Ascension, storm petrels are rarely seen on land during the day, returning to their nesting burrows on Boatswainbird at night. Their fluttering flight is reminiscent of that of a bat. Their dark brown plumage is broken up by a striking white band on their rump. This species is currently limited to breeding on offshore islands as they are vulnerable to predation by rodents. If you are fortunate enough to go out on a boat trip there is a good chance that you may see some storm petrels feeding out at sea during the day.

White tern (*Gygis alba*) ●

These small white, inquisitive terns, locally referred to as fairy 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*) ● Black noddy (*Anous minutus*) ●

The brown noddy is noticeably larger than the darker black noddy and the pale forehead 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 cliff ledges where they nest colonially.

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 or on the Letterbox Peninsula. Black noddies can be observed at Pillar Bay or around Letterbox.

Sooty tern (*Onychoprion fuscata*) ●

Sooty terns have black plumage on their backs and white underneath, with a deeply forked tail. They are locally known as Wideawakes 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 9.6 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 birds nesting at the fairs for a larger proportion of the year in smaller numbers but with a pronounced peak every 9.6 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.

Masked booby (*Sula dactylatra*) ● Brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*) ● Red-footed booby (*Sula sula*) ●

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 close to shore.

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

