Seabird News

SEYCHELLES SEABIRD GROUP Newsletter Issue 8 November 2011

The ***Seychelles Seabird Group*** was formed in 2002 to facilitate the sustainable management and conservation of seabird resources in Seychelles. It comprises owners and managers of globally recognized IBAs (Important Bird Areas) and nationally important seabird sites. Our main role is to work collaboratively to: Gain national perspective; Prioritise seabird research and monitoring on a national level; Coordinate all seabird research and monitoring; Utilise standardised methods to ensure the comparability of data; Ensure priority seabird work is undertaken; and Use information collected to direct future research and/or management.

Produced by:

For the SSG. For more information please contact:

Riaz Aumeeruddy,
Seabird Group Coordinator,
Nature Seychelles,
Centre for Environment and Education, Roche Caiman, Mahé, Seychelles.
ph: +248 4601100
fax: +248 4601102
email: riaz@natureseychelles.org

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Editorial

Dear SSG members,

Welcome to the eighth issue of the SSG newsletter.

In this issue, we have some more exciting news on seabirds from different islands where seabirds are monitored.

From Aldabra, we have the results on the census conducted on frigatebirds. Sooty terns are well represented in this issue, with an article from Licia Calabrese of Aride Island on the special characteristics of that bird and an update on the sooty tern project on Denis Island. Cousin Island provides the results of the seabird census of July/August. From Alphonse, we have some interesting information on the rare sighting of two species of terns. Finally we have some initial information on the seabirds present on Little Frégate.

I wish you all a happy reading!

Riaz Aumeeruddy, Nature Seychelles
Science Coordinator & SSG coordinator

News:

Seabirds news from Cousin

By Mary Ledlie and Riaz Aumeeruddy

Seabird censuses are carried out twice a year on Cousin Island, once during the NW monsoon and once in the SE trade-wind season. July/August 2011 were busy months as we undertook the census for lesser noddies, brown noddies, white-tailed tropicbirds, white terns and Audubon's shearwaters. While tropicbirds, white terns and Audubon's shearwaters breed all year round, the lesser noddies and brown noddies breed here only during the SE season, so this is the only time of year when we can count these species. The census is carried out when nest building is complete and most pairs have laid eggs but before too many chicks have hatched. The same methodology is used for each census, to ensure that the values obtained are comparable, and follow the Seabird Monitoring Handbook for Seychelles, whereby 70 circular plots are randomly selected over the island and all nests within them are counted. For brown noddies the methodology is slightly different as they only nest on a certain portion of the island (mostly rocky areas up the hill) and therefore this area alone was surveyed for this species.

Photo: White terns (Nature Seychelles)

Photo: White-tailed tropicbird (Peter Chadwick)

For white-tailed tropicbirds, 50% of the plots were occupied and the total island population was calculated as 861 breeding pairs (95% CI: 580-1,143), which is slightly higher than the estimates from the last couple of censuses (Figure 1). Data from a separate study of breeding success for this species indicates that out of 116 permanently marked nests being monitored, 42 (36%) were active at the time of the census, suggesting that the total population may be more than double the value estimated from the census data.

For white terns, 57% of the plots were occupied and the total island population was calculated as 1,909 breeding pairs (95% CI: 1,354-2,465), which is a little higher than the numbers normally found to be breeding at this time of year (Figure 2).

For lesser noddies, 97% of the plots were occupied and the total island population was calculated as 85,956 breeding pairs (95% CI: 73,895-98,018). This value is very similar to the number found breeding during the last census in July 2010 and is also comparable to values from several previous censuses (Figure 3).

For brown noddies, 68% of plots were occupied and the total island population was calculated as 1,917 breeding pairs (95% CI: 822-3,013), which is also very similar to the value from August 2010 and from previous years (Figure 4).

For Audubon's shearwaters, 17% of the plots were occupied and the total island population was calculated as 225 breeding pairs (85% CI: 84-366). This value is very similar to the value found in February 2011 but is much lower than values from previous censuses (Figure 5). The reason for this apparent decline in numbers is unknown at present but will be subject to further investigation in the near future.

Seabird censuses have been carried out at regular intervals on Cousin over the past 10 years, and are providing a good dataset on the size and long-term trends of the breeding populations. We also undertake continuous monitoring of breeding success for several species; over the last few months we have been focusing on white-tailed tropicbirds and lesser noddies. For white-tailed tropicbirds, three plots have been selected around the island, representing hill, plateau and coastal habitats. More than 100 nests have been marked within these plots and they are checked for activity on a weekly basis. By looking at the proportion of nests in each plot which are active at the time of the census, we can get an estimate of the total breeding population, as discussed above.

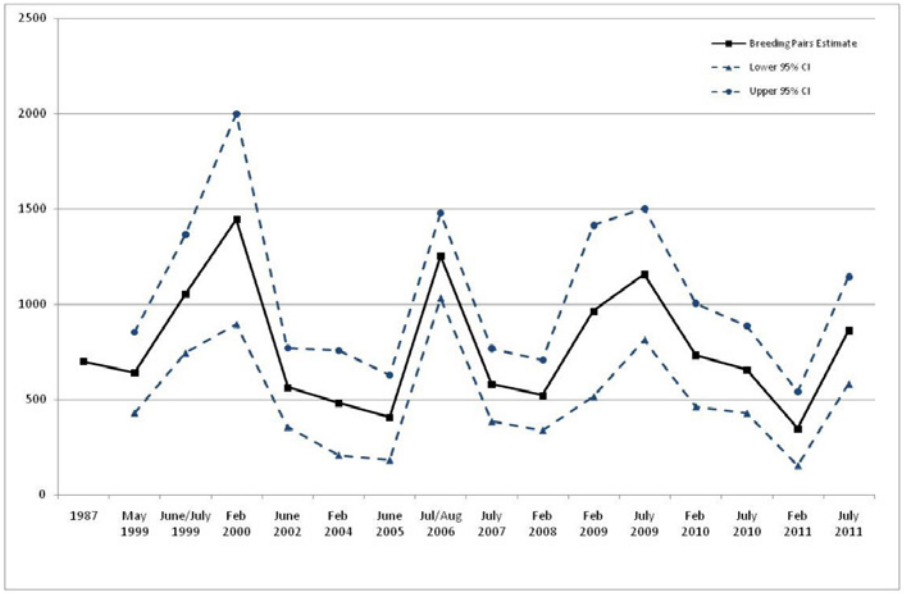


Figure 1. Population of white-tailed tropicbird from 1987- July 2011

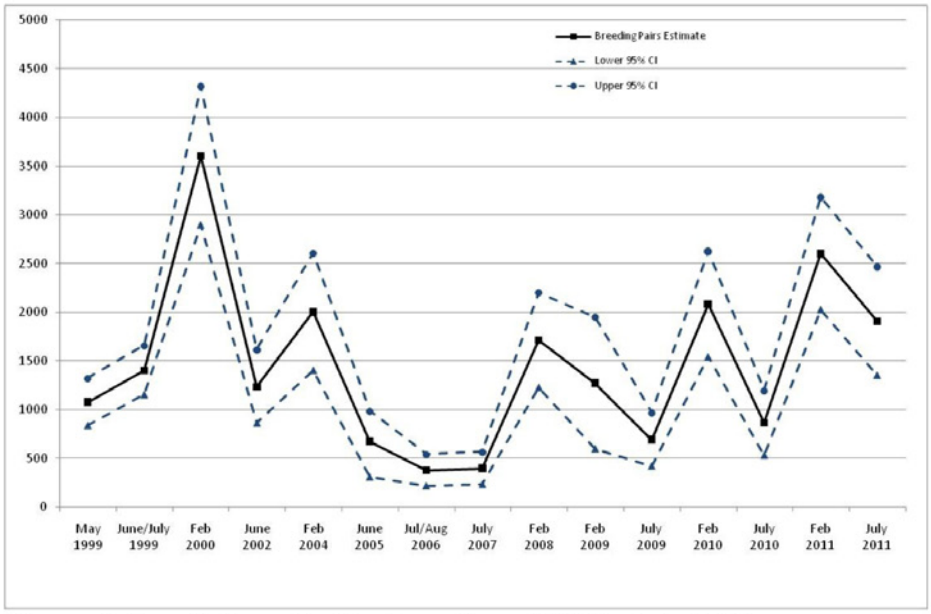


Figure 2. Population of white terns from 1999 to July 2011

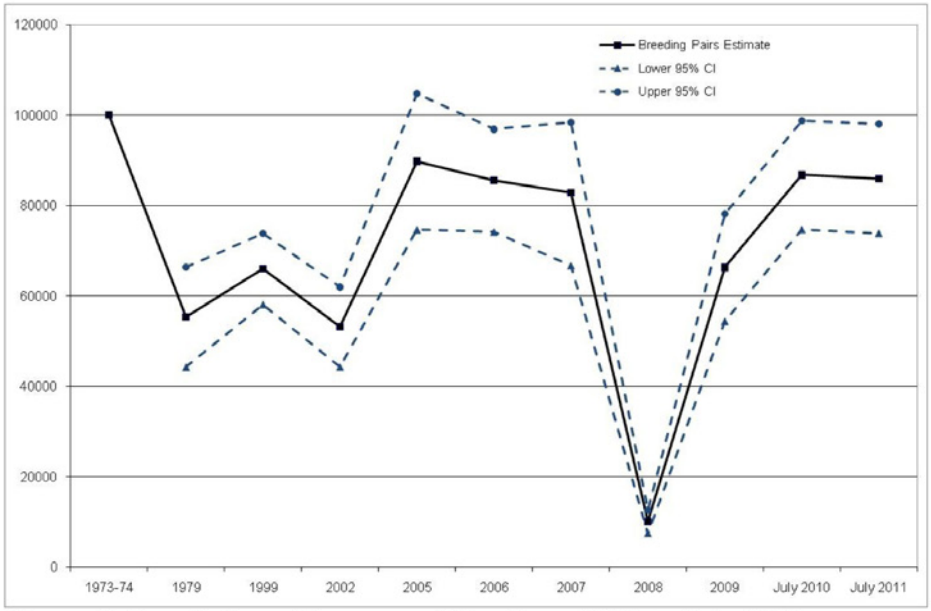


Figure 3. Population of Lesser noddies from 1973 to July 2011

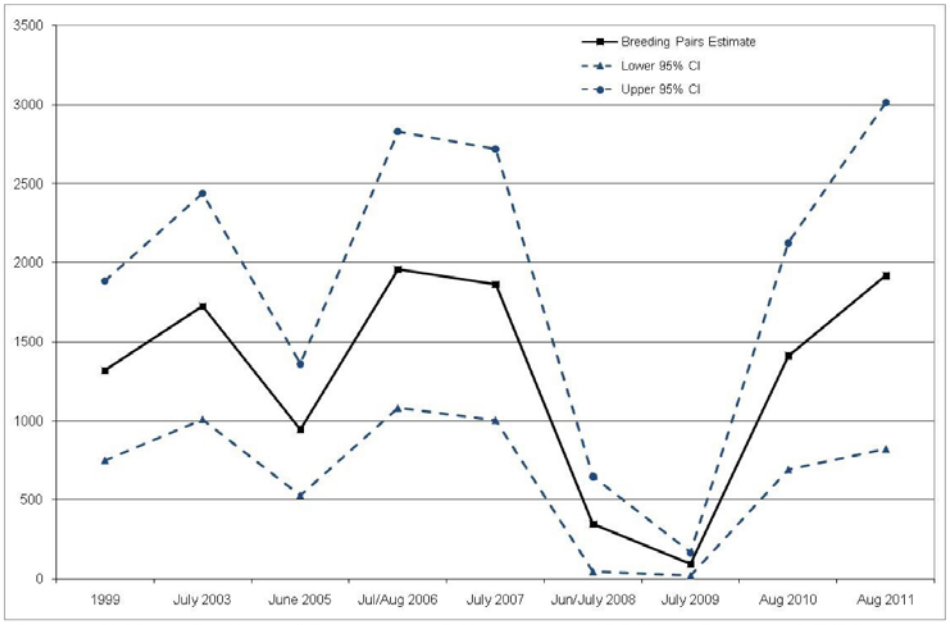


Figure 4. Population of brown noddies from 1999 to August 2011

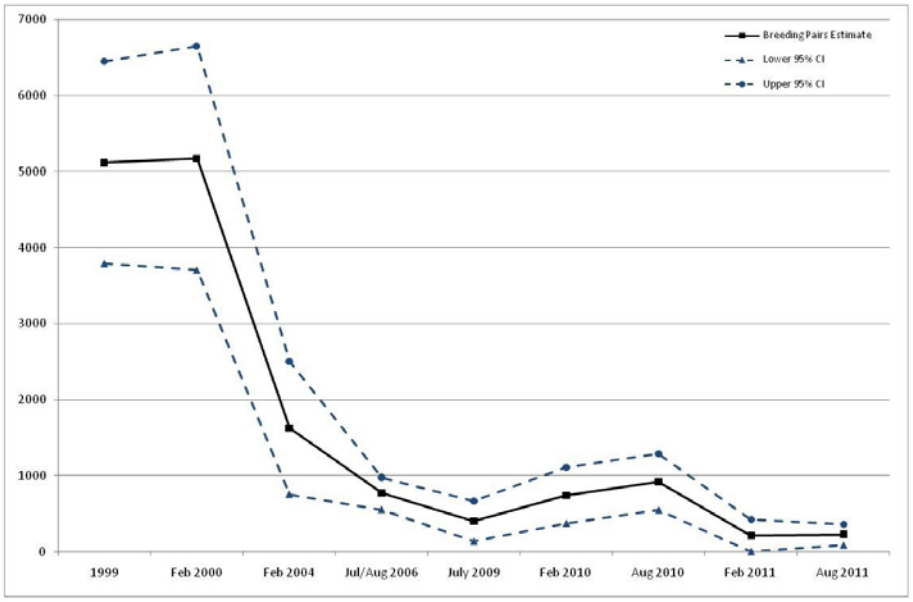


Figure 5. Population of Audubon shearwater from 1999 to July 2011

Seabirds News from Little Fregate

By Tatiana Raposo de Rezende and Greg Canning

Little Fregate from a distance © Tatiana Raposo

During the last week of September 2011, a field trip was conducted to Little Fregate for an assessment of seabird populations. Little Fregate is an islet of approximately 2.3 hectares laying 3 km away from Fregate Island. The islet is shaped by large granite boulders along with coral formations and is an important breeding ground for seabird species. The seabird species found on Little Fregate were:

Seabird colonies on Little Fregate © Tatiana Raposo

Bridled Terns *(Sterna anaethetus)*

Large numbers of Bridled Terns *(Sterna anaethetus)* roosting on rocks and boulders of Little Fregate were encountered. The colony of Bridled Terns in Little Fregate was not previously recorded and could possibly represent one of the biggest colonies of Bridled Terns in Seychelles.

In order to get an indication of the size of the population of Bridled Terns, repeated counts were conducted from a set of photographs taken from the boat during late afternoon. Based on the photographs, the population of Bridled Terns on Little Fregate was estimated on minimum 1050 individuals. However, a census covering the peak of laying and incubation is recommended to get more accurate results.

Bridled Tern on Little Fregate © Tatiana Raposo

A few male Bridled Terns were observed offering fish to the female as part of the courtship display. Yet is uncertain, their displaying behaviour indicated that they were possibly on the beginning of breeding season. However, regular checks will be conducted to determine the onset of laying.

Sooty Terns *(Sterna fuscata)*
A small number of adults and chicks of Sooty Terns *(Sterna fuscatus)* were observed. Thus, a further study during their breeding peak is required to estimate the size of their population.

Brown Noddies *(Anous stolidus)*
A large breeding colony of Brown Noddies *(Anous stolidus)* was present on Little Fregate. The Brown Noddies appeared to be at the end of their breeding season and only a few chicks were found. Repeated counts from a set of photographs taken from the boat were also conducted for this species and the population was estimated on approximately 350 individuals.

Wedge-tailed Shearwaters *(Puffinus pacificus)*
Little Frégate is home to a significant colony of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters *(Puffinus pacificus)* and possibly Audubon's Shearwaters *(Puffinus lherminieri)*. The islet was densely covered in shearwater burrows and a few individuals were encountered nesting in the burrows. A total 365 burrows with signs of occupancy were counted in one side of the islet.


Wedge-tailed shearwater nesting on Little Fregate © Tatiana Raposo

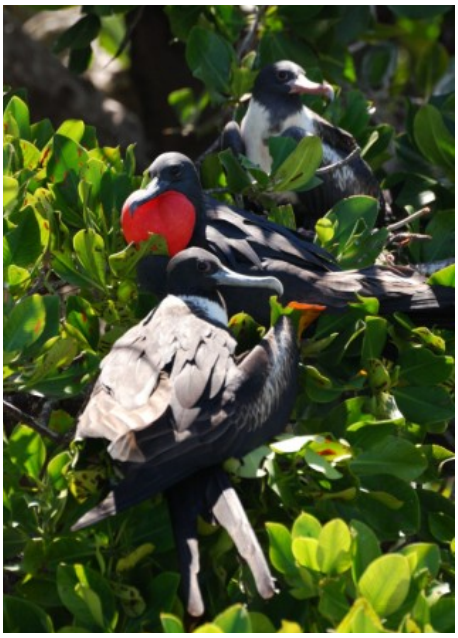
Accurate censusing and continuous monitoring of the seabird colonies of Little Fregate is recommended in order to guide management actions and ensure the conservation and welfare of those species.

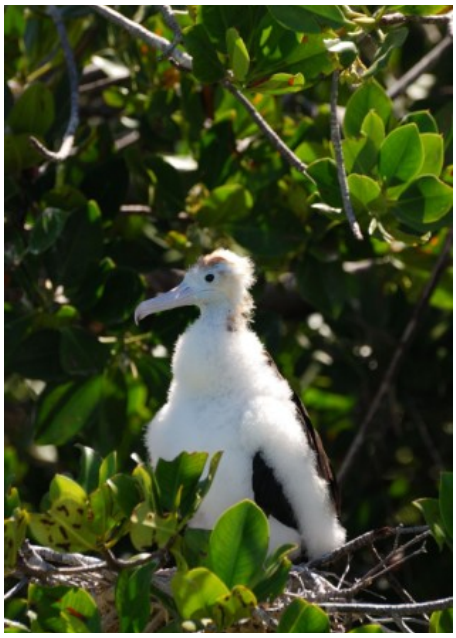

© Tatiana Raposo

Articles:

Frigatebird survey on Aldabra

Seychelles Island Foundation





Top: The frigatebird survey team (L-R: Andy, Nella, Michal and Stan; photo by C. Quanz), Below and right: frigatebird adults and chick (photos by M. Sur)

A new frigatebird survey has been launched by SIF staff on Aldabra, which has the second largest frigatebird colony in the world and the largest in the Indian Ocean.

The first part of the survey in January and February marks the start of the fourth official census to be carried out on the atoll, following surveys by Diamond in 1967-68, Reville in 1976-77 and Burger and Betts in 2000.

According to Reville (1983), there were approximately 4000 breeding pairs of greater frigatebird and 6000 pairs of lesser frigatebird on the atoll.

Numbers from the earlier surveys did not differ substantially but the species' distribution around the atoll has changed over time. The biggest colony in the 1960s was at Middle Camp, while Camp Fregate hosted the largest colony in the 1970s. There also used to be a large colony at Passe Gionnet; however, now there are only a few birds nesting there. Last year the birds were recorded breeding at Grande Poche on Picard for the first time.

Because frigatebirds are highly sensitive to human disturbance when they are incubating eggs and brooding young chicks, the survey was scheduled for the beginning of the year (Jan–Feb), when larger chicks are on the nests and colonies are less sensitive.

The survey was carried out mainly by boat, keeping a safe distance (20-30m) and using binoculars, tally counters and GPS units so the nesting colonies could be mapped. The entire process was tide-dependent as are most activities on Aldabra. Some colonies, such as Camp Fregate on the east of Malabar, had to be monitored on very high spring tide while other places required neap tides. Middle Camp was surveyed from the boat at high tide with some parts surveyed on foot at low tide.

SIF volunteer Michal Šúr, who led the survey, said that the whole process went smoothly and the team of four managed to complete the work ahead of schedule. He added that the other team members were very committed and cooperative throughout and that it was an excellent team effort. Other members of the survey team were SIF rangers Nella Victor, Andy Gouffe and Stan Denis who was also the team's boatman. The survey so far indicates that the frigatebird populations of Aldabra have remained healthy. To obtain the most accurate estimate and complete the survey the same census will be repeated in a year because the frigate nesting cycle takes up to 500 days. SIF will therefore be able to report complete updated figures in 2012.

Modified from article available on SIF website at www.sif.sc

Sooty Tern Project, Denis Island 2011

Green Islands Foundation

Since the sooty tern re-colonisation project initiation in 2008, preparation prior to the breeding season has always preoccupied keen environmental enthusiasts on Denis Island. This year, such activity began in early May starting with grass cutting despite the dry season and no sighting of the birds flying over the island.

GIF's staff members along with the landscaping team started with the preparation of the site, followed by deployment of the decoys and positioning of the speakers around the area. From the first few weeks of May, sightings of the Sooties have been infrequent and the project staffs were getting worried as it was considerably late. The speakers were turned on beginning of June. By the middle of June few birds had appeared over the island which was strange. On checking with Bird and Aride Islands, we were informed that the birds were late in arriving there as well; such news settled the team's mind to an extent. It was only towards the end of June that some birds began to fly over the project site.

Following the recruitment of Denis Island's Environmental Officer in June, monitoring of the sooty terns has been more active, using the broadcast calls replay on the speakers along with the monitoring protocol established by Professor Chris Feare.

Once again the number of Sooties flying over the island and actually landing at the site was low for the month of June, with maximum of 150 birds recorded on the very early morning of the 27th June. Then on Saturday 2nd July ~100 birds landed and about the same numbers remained on the ground all day but left at around 6.15 pm. The next day from about 7.00 am, 150 to 200 birds landed and remained all day but departed again at around the same time as the previous day.

The 1st egg laid by a sooty tern on the island's designated area was recorded on Monday 4th July late in the evening, after all the birds have fled the ground. It was clearly noticeable that there was no incubation taking place, from the time the birds were on the ground until they fled the island past 6 p.m. for the night; the eggs were just left on bare ground, at the mercy of potential predators and the weather elements.

Thousands of birds must have visited the site because all day; they flew in, landed, while others flew out. This went on until July 8th and since then, few birds have appeared at the project site.

The frantic activity observed on the ground from 2nd July to 8th July included mating, squabbling and ground scraping are the most active ever observed since the project started in 2008. Four eggs were laid which were damaged by some predators but it is odd that the Sooties did not remain to incubate their eggs. Despite no breeding success in this year an improving establishment of the Sooty Terns on site was seen and we were happy that the birds accepted the area as suitable for nesting so we hope for a better year next year.

Taken from the blog: http://greenislandsfoundation.blog.com/2011/07/21/the-conservation-story-of-the-sooty-terns-n-denis-island/

A Bird in a Million

By Licia Calabrese

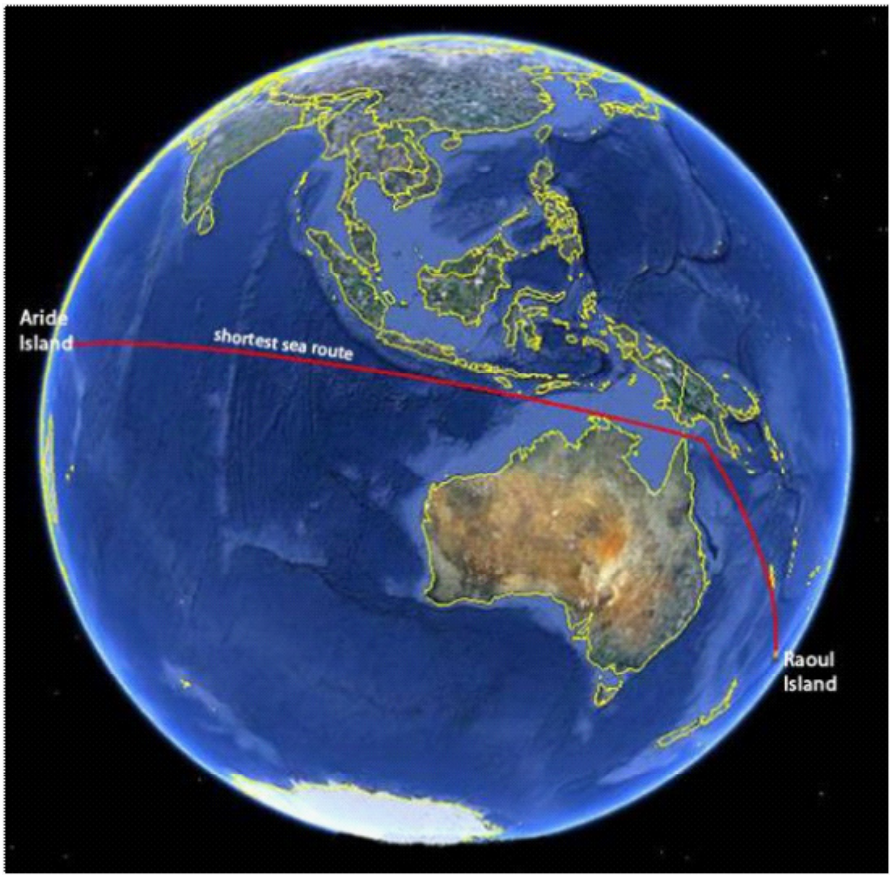
Seychelles is an archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean, famous as one of the most exotic holiday destinations. "You're going to Seychelles? Wow! Where are they exactly?" would be a common response for most lucky visitors. You have to be a long-distance traveler just to get here, the islands which are "A Thousand Miles from Anywhere" as the adverts sometimes say. But for tourists who do make it here, how many realize that there is a bird that comes here every year, a bird which in a year may travel tens of thousands of miles, which in a lifetime may complete a million miles, which can fly non-stop for years, and which would make most human travelers look like real stay-at-homes. If we are talking "air-miles", then the Sooty Tern takes the prize.

How to describe such a beautiful bird? If you had designed it you would be among the world's greatest aeronautical engineers. Stylish colours for flight recognition: jet black above and pure white beneath; slender, tapering swept-back wings, long, elegant tail streamers, retractable webbed undercarriage that also doubles as propellers in water, large eyes with 320^0 vision and in the cockpit, an instrument panel that includes GPS, complex weather analysis, plus solar and stellar navigation systems. Without this, they could never find their way back to their breeding islands, rarely more than a tiny speck in a huge ocean. Not only do they find their way back to their favourite breeding islands like Aride, Bird Island or Desnoeufs but because (like most seabirds) they mate for life, they need to relocate their partner in March and April when they return to Seychelles to breed. Then there occurs one of the greatest tropical wildlife spectacles as hundreds of thousands of sooty terns gather in a swirling vortex over the island, calling continuously. This teeming aerial discotheque is the way they locate their mates. Among the cacophony they will recognize their partner's call, and then they pair off into an ecstatic airborne ballet, swooping, soaring and diving in close formation. This goes on all day and all night. For pilots, night flying is the ultimate advanced skill: but to do this within hundreds of feet of other aircraft is unimaginably dangerous.

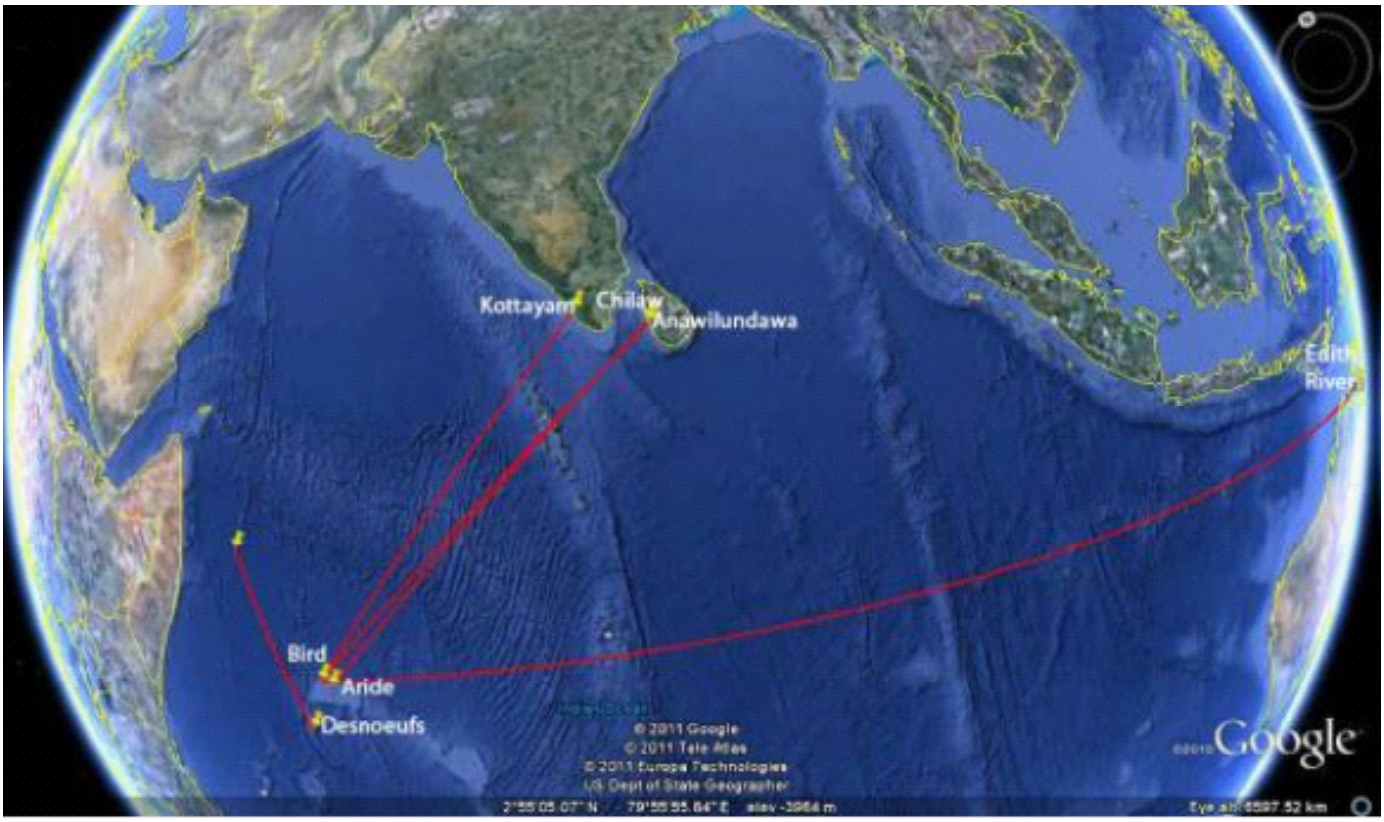
How do they do it? We don't know: but they do it without even thinking about it. They can even feed at night, and there is some evidence that they may specialize on catching small fish which come to the surface only after dark. So here it is: an extraordinary flying machine perfected over 40 million years of evolution, a bird capable of refueling at sea without ever needing to land, which breeds in Seychelles but can wander every ocean

on earth. How do we know this? Because scientists have been putting small aluminium rings on the legs of Sooty Terns for 40 years.

Chris Feare, a British scientist, has ringed over 24,000 Sooty Terns in Seychelles since 1972. These are some of the incredible things his ringing has shown: one young bird ringed on Bird Island in 1973 was found the next year in Northern Territory, Australia, 8,000 km away. Another was recorded 3,000km away in Sri Lanka, and a third was caught on a ship at night off the coast of Somalia. But the most amazing one of all was a bird ringed as a chick on Raoul Island, Kermadec, northeast of New Zealand in 1961, which was found breeding on Aride Island in June 1995. This single record proved two incredible facts: firstly that it had moved 13,750km from its birthplace to settle and breed in another ocean. Secondly that at 34 years of age, it was still fit enough to be breeding! This implies that they may indeed live even longer even than this – perhaps travel is good for you!



The most impressive Sooty tern journey, from Raoul Island to Aride (14,240 km)



Long-distance travel by Seychelles Sooty Terns

Population: *Aride 300,000, Bird 700,000, Desnoeufs 500,000 Farquhar 260,000, Cosmoledo 1million ? Others c. 10,000 i.e. total Seychelles population c. 2-3 million.*

Lifestyle: *breed at 5-7 yrs, means may spend at least the first 5 years of life flying as they do not come to land except to breed, and can fly day and night. Refuel at sea. Food items 6-8cm and include many deepwater species that come to the surface at night. Fly at night without any effort. Extraordinary bird!!*

Two extremely rare sightings in two days on Alphonse Island!

Aurelie Duhec and Richard Jeanne

On the 27th of September, while on beach patrol early in the morning, Richard and Aurélie came across an unusual medium sized tern roosting on the beach in a Greater Crested Tern (GCT) colony. The bird had a black cap similar to a Roseate tern but had dark legs with a long, slender and black bill. The species is highly suspected to be a White-cheeked Tern, *Sterna repressa* by ICS team and Adrian Skerrett, a member of Seychelles Birds Record Committee (SBRC). It breeds in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the coast of northwest Indian Ocean to western India; it is a vagrant southward to South Africa (Birds of Seychelles, 2001).

This species is very uncommon for the region; only two Seychelles records have been confirmed to date: one at Aldabra the 12th of December 1976 (RP Prys-Jones) and one adult in non-breeding plumage on Mahé at Providence, the 20th of November 2004 (AP Skerrett).

On the following day, the team made a new exiting sighting. While counting the number of individual in the same GCT colony, Richard and Aurélie were surprised by the plumage and size of a single individual. It was bigger, larger-billed and has darker upperparts than the other surrounded GCT. The bird was identified as a Greater Crested Tern race velox (Birds of East Africa, 2006).

The GCT usually observed throughout Seychelles is the Race thalassinus, it breeds on outer islands, notably Aldabra and Cosmoledo. On Alphonse and St Francois, groups of more than 100 individuals are frequently observed roosting on the beaches. But the race velox occurs from the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal and is very unusual to observe it in Seychelles, there has only been one previous report in Seychelles. This report was on similar dates in 1973 at Bird Island.

Sterna repressa on the left

Bird with dark grey plummage is a Greater Crested Tern race velox

For confirmation of their identification, detailed descriptions have been sent to the Seychelles Birds records Committee (http://www.seychellesbirdrecordscommittee.com)