



# Seabird News

Seychelles Seabird Group Newsletter

Issue 3

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And more. . .

### Next issue...

Inventory of tropicbirds  
ringed in Seychelles

## The last 6 months...

Several things have happened during the past 6 months that are worthy of note.

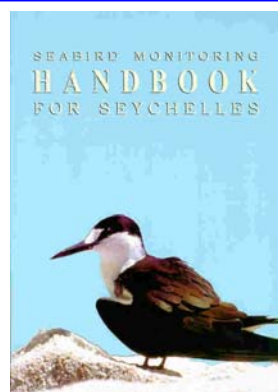
**New tern colonies:** Part of the Aride Roseate tern colony moved to Booby Island to breed. This may or may not have been a sensible move on their part as Aride is a protected Special Reserve with a permanent human presence to deter poachers, while Booby, although legally protected as a Nature Reserve, has no human presence to deter poachers. Poaching was unfortunately an all too frequent occurrence through the Sooty tern laying period and surely some Roseate eggs were also lost in this way. Roseate eggs are very small which may help protect them as they would make a pretty pathetic omelet! Amazingly enough some Roseate chicks did fledge from Booby, though exactly how many is not known. Terns are known to move colonies relatively commonly. This is good news for islands planning rehabilitation. If predators are removed and native vegetation replanted there is a good chance tern species will move in.

Good news for the SSG is that we received SR 18,000 from the Environment Trust Fund (ETF) for a new computer and printer for the SSG coordinator. The computer is used to house the Seabird Database and to produce the SSG biannual newsletter. A lap-top was purchased and is proving very useful as it can also be taken into the field and data entered during censuses, rather than having to wait until getting back to the office.

Rachel Bristol - SSG coordinator



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## Seabird monitoring handbook for Seychelles

The second edition of this useful handbook, promised in the last issue is now available. Please contact the SSG coordinator if you would like to purchase the handbook (contact details are on page 8).

Price is SR 50=

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# News from members...

## Seabird news from Aride Island

by Michael Betts, Nov. 03

The annual build-up of Sooty Terns reached its peak over the island at the beginning of the period, then settled down as birds went off to sea to forage for the energy needed for a long breeding season. When the SE monsoon switched on in May, rougher seas around the island came alive, especially in the evenings, with tens of thousands of feeding terns and shearwaters. By late May the Sooties had started laying, around 3 weeks later than last year, to be followed in the next few days by noddies and Roseate Terns.

June is the busiest month on the island, particularly this year when not only the established seabird transects had to be recorded as usual, but also the Alan Burger designed standard circular plots, to enable calibration of the two methods before, if all is well, the long-serving Aride transects are phased out. Fortunately, Rachel Bristol and Ian Valmont came over from Nature Seychelles to spend a hard-working week recording almost 150 circular plots with the help of Aride Rangers, who in turn received valuable training. Most surprising was a dramatic doubling of Brown Noddy numbers, confirmed by both methods - where did the extra 16,000-odd birds of breeding age arrive from? At the same time, dawn to dusk watches and patrols were mounted to restrict the annual poaching of Sooty Tern eggs and adults. An exhausting month.

The next task was to monitor study sites in order to get an idea of how productive the season was. For Brown and Lesser Noddies and White-tailed tropicbirds this is done by visiting marked sites each week and recording nest contents, a job carried out by Aride Rangers Regis Tiatousse (Brown Noddy), Julius MacGregor (Lesser Noddy) and Tony Jupiter (White-tailed tropicbirds). For the vast Sooty Tern colony the situation is not so straightforward, as Aride's Sooties breed largely on the forest floor, making them difficult to study as compared for instance with the more typical colony on Bird Island, which is out in the open. For this species daily counts are made during the peak fledging period of adults and juveniles flying by off the beach, and over a period of weeks a picture is built up of the percentage of young birds. Although not an accurate measure of breeding success, this percentage can be used to compare one breeding season with another. Figures have yet to be processed, but it's clear that noddies and Sooty Terns did much better than last year, which was very poor due to the disappearance of food fish in mid-July.

Roseate Terns are globally the rarest seabird at Aride (and in Seychelles), and have been studied intensively for 7 years by Dr Jaime Ramos of Lisbon's Coimbra University, with the help this year of field researcher David Monticelli and Aride staff. This season part of the population of

1,000 pairs bred on Booby Island, where at least some survived the poachers to fledge an unknown number of young. On Aride, productivity was estimated by David and Jaime to be slightly less than 0.5 young per pair, not as good as last year when Roseates managed to fledge just before the food shortage, but not bad considering food supply was again interrupted, in the second week of July.

Bridled Terns breed on an 8-9 month cycle, and partial counts made in September (a full island count was not made to avoid disturbance to Sooty Terns) indicated a breeding population of 180 pairs, a small increase on the previous cycle.

Now, in early November, the great bulk of breeding terns have departed, and the first round of visits to 20 randomly placed quadrats used for monitoring Wedge-tailed and Audubon's Shearwaters has been completed. This takes place after dark, which is when these birds visit their burrows, so it's quite a tiring procedure for the Rangers on top of all their other duties. Indications are that around 32,000 pairs of Audubon's and 18,000 pairs of Wedge-tails are currently breeding, but since Audubon's don't breed all at once, unlike the Sooty Terns, further visits will have to be made to get the complete picture.

Aride's tiny 'colony' of Brown Boobies continues to occupy a rocky platform on the north coast among the roosting frigatebirds, but while 2,800 of the latter have been counted recently, there are just 4 Brown Boobies. Although in

adult plumage, all 4 appear to have grey rather than yellow bills, which may indicate they are not yet old enough to breed. We live in hope, as although the Roseate is the rarest seabird in global terms, in purely Seychelles terms the Brown

Booby is much rarer: Adrian Skerrett and Ian Bullock suggest only around 60 pairs on Cosmoledo in 'Birds of Seychelles.'

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## Seabird news from Cousine Island by Quentin and Deborah Hagens, Oct. 03

The annual seabird breeding census for estimating the population sizes of the Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*, the Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, the White Tern *Gypis alba* and the White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* was carried out between 18 August and 25 August.

The method used was similar to the one established by Wright and Passmore, involving counting in

300m<sup>2</sup> circular quadrats with a radius of 9.77m. Quadrats were situated at the intersections of a 50m grid superimposed onto an aerial photo of Cousine Island using ArcGIS ArcView 8.1. This resulted in 96 intersections compared to the 103 of Wright and Passmore.

The most important point about the seabird census for 2003 is that it was carried out much later

than in previous years due to a change in conservation officers, meaning the results may not be directly comparable. The results are listed in the table below.

The White-tailed Tropicbird and White Tern breed throughout the year, so the total number is a "snap-shot" of the total annual breeding population of the birds.

Results of annual breeding seabird census

	Lesser Noddy	Brown Noddy	White-tailed Tropicbird	White Tern
<b>Cousine Total</b>	57626	1480	381	955
<b>Range ±</b>	12780	491	156	238
<b>Max.</b>	70406	1971	537	1193
<b>Min.</b>	44846	989	225	717

Brown Noddies occupy most of the coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*) on the plateau with loose groups /

families on the rocky outcrops. A complete survey of the whole Island was done to determine their

population size from 31 August to 8 September. The results are in the table below.

Results of whole island Brown Noddy nest count

	Coconut	Pandanus	Rock	Total 2003
Plateau	147	0	5	152
North hill	14	4	40	58
Saddle	16	0	6	22
South ridge	98	1	58	157
North point	35	3	10	48
Total no. pairs	310	8	119	437
%	700.9	1.8	27.2	

The pronounced difference between the number of breeding pairs counted during the annual census and that of the complete

count could be because of the timing of the census. The 4 species census was done in early August while the total island count of

Brown Noddy nests was done at the end of the breeding season in September when many chicks may have already fledged.

Approximately 100 White-tailed Tropicbird nests are monitored on a weekly basis for breeding success as well as 20 Fairy Tern

nests and 150 Lesser Noddy nests. Bridled Tern numbers were estimated on a monthly basis and estimated to be between 20 to 30

pairs. Sooty Terns and Frigatebirds have been regularly seen flying over the island.

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## Seabird news from Cousin Island

by Cousin Staff, Oct. 2003

Over most of the last 6 months, being the SE trade wind season, various seabirds on the island have completed their breeding cycle.

The Lesser noddies alighted on Cousin en-mass in preparation for their breeding season bringing the *Pisonia* alive with their antics.

During June large amounts of regurgitated fish (some partially digested but most freshly caught) were observed to have been dropped mostly by the Lesser noddies. Interestingly the noddies were not feeding chicks but were still incubating at the time. The most likely cause of the regurgitation was a super abundant food supply (and birds with eyes bigger than their bellies!)

In July, quite a number of Lesser noddy chicks fell off their nests. This species, like many other seabird species, usually abandon their young whenever this happens. However one lucky chick that was close to the visitor's trail, although on the ground, was still fed by its parents, who also vigilantly guarded the surrounding "territory" from intruders!

100 Lesser noddy nests found across the island were monitored from nest building through until fledging. Ninety five of the nests fledged chicks giving an estimate of 95% fledging success for the season. This is a significant improvement to last year when almost all the chicks starved to death presumably due to climate's

changes whereby the food source was said to be very far away from the nesting grounds.

A Brown noddy census was undertaken on the island in July. The last Brown noddy census was conducted in 1999 and numbers appear to have increased slightly since then.

White tern and White-tailed tropicbird breeding success are also monitored on a weekly basis all year round. All the other seabirds,

Bridled tern's, like the Lesser noddy, had a successful breeding season with most chicks fledging around October.

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## Seabird news from Frégate Island

by Beate Sachse, Nov. 03

At Frégate Island the period April to October 2003 was dominated by the Lesser Noddy breeding season. Having got off to an early start, the season turned out to be a very successful one for the noddies. As early as March 2003 the first nests were being built and chicks were already hatching by mid April. No sooner had the chicks from the first nesting fledged and flown, than the noddies were seen

aggregating, busily gathering leaves and picking up shell-grit on the beach. The next round of nest building commenced, and the subsequent batch of chicks fledged as successfully as the first.

In mid August a third and final nest building commenced. The third nesting event produced fewer hatched chicks and

indicated the end of the breeding activity for 2003.

The noddies nesting was characterized by a fair amount of chick mortality, with a seemingly great number of chicks being blown down by wind. With numerous of chicks on the ground, we made a conscious effort to sensitize employees on Frégate Island to drive their vehicles with

care, so to avoid harming the chicks sitting in the road. This is an ongoing process to teach and educate people to be tolerant of what is often perceived to be just a lot of noisy and smelly birds on the island.

At the time of writing, the noddies are still here, but in smaller numbers. Activity at the Banyan tree in front of the Plantation House, which at the height of the breeding had 490 nests, has visibly calmed down and now the noddies are only roosting there.

Unfortunately, due to work pressure, a complete census of the noddy breeding success could not be made. One area of the island was censused thoroughly, but no follow-up was made, and therefore no extrapolation of the counts is possible.

One of the highlights of the season was undoubtedly the visit of a huge number of frigatebirds, which flew over the island on two occasions. They were spotted in the mornings, and a quick count

gave a figure of 37 and 40 birds respectively. The birds were just gliding over and at times flew at very low altitude.

Another exciting event was the record of a Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* - the first record for Frégate Island. Although these birds breed on I'lot Frégate just off Frégate Island, it has never before been recorded on Frégate Island itself.

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## Seabird news from Bird Island

Refer to the article by Chris Feare (page 6) for Bird Island Sooty tern news. The islands small White-tailed tropicbird population is also monitored regularly. All known nest

sites are visited, breeding activity recorded and new nest sites are added to the check-list as they are discovered. Ring numbers are recorded for ringed tropicbirds

and unringed adults and nestlings (just prior to fledging) are ringed for future identification.

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## Articles...

### Salted booby meat (and sea turtle) court case has been extended for some strange reasons

by Ian Valmont

The Supreme Court Chief of Justice, Mr Vivekanand Alllear has post-poned until next year the case of the 38 bags of salted booby and turtle meat which were apprehended by the police in January this year. The meat which was first guarded at Central Police station and eventually transferred to a large cargo container at New

Port is still under strict supervision. We've heard on the news that the meat is becoming 'rotten' evidence and the defendant lawyers seem to be astute in trying to win the case by delaying. However, in line that we're inputting a lot of efforts to protect these endangered creatures, it is a sad episode to

hear that yet another group of people may get away with an unlawful act. If it should not be the case for real justice to prevail in this incident, let us try not to 'turn a blind eye' on hard evidence which was the original cause behind the January's arrest.

Ian Valmont is the Science Assistant at Nature Seychelles

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## Seabirds noted on D'Arros Island and neighbouring St Joseph Atoll, November 2002

by Rachel Bristol

Last November I was lucky enough visit D'Arros Island and St Joseph Atoll for 6 days. My main task for the trip was to assess seabird populations.

During the visit 3 species were breeding, Wedge-tailed shearwaters, Black naped terns and White terns. Wedge-tailed shearwaters breed on several islands in the St Joseph Atoll: the largest population on Fouquet was estimated to be 21,000 pairs with smaller colonies on Benjamin (1000 - 2000 pairs) and Paul (in excess of 1000 pairs). Some burrows were noted in Ressource and the distinctive shearwater smell was apparent but no active nests were found. One pair of Black naped terns was breeding on the southern tip of Ressource. A pullus approximately two weeks old was located on the shore near the water. Despite apparently suitable

habitat on most of the other islets only one other non-breeding pair was seen loafing on the sand flats between Fouquet and St Joseph. White terns were present at low densities on all islands but in insufficient numbers to warrant plot sampling; numbers were crudely estimated at about 450-500 pairs.

D'Arros and Benjamin had extensive seabird roosts. Eighty Frigatebirds were counted in Casuarinas near the airstrip on D'Arros and about 400 Greater and 600 Lesser frigatebirds roosted in the Casuarinas on Benjamin. Brown and Lesser noddies roosted on D'Arros but it was not possible to accurately count them as many were still streaming in to roost after it was too dark to see; certainly several thousand of each species were present. Smaller roosts of Bridled terns were

recorded on D'Arros and Fouquet, with in excess of 30 birds on each.

A number of other non-breeding seabirds were seen. At least 50 Crested terns were feeding and roosting on banks in the St Joseph lagoon. Descriptions by staff of a large ground nesting seabird and the presence of recently fledged juveniles suggest there is a breeding colony present during the South-east monsoon, probably on the southern edge of St Joseph. Only one pair of White-tailed tropicbird was noted displaying near D'Arros; once again reports from staff indicate that a few pairs breed. One moribund common tern was picked up and a small number of Sooty terns were seen flying within the St Joseph lagoon.

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## Sooty Terns on Bird Island 2003

by Chris Feare

Sooty Tern arrival on Bird Island appeared normal in 2003 and did not suggest early laying, as had happened in 2000 and 2001. I therefore planned my visit to Bird Island for the second half of June, the aim being to search for ringed birds as they incubated in the huge colony. This is to collect data on the return of the ringed birds in order to monitor annual survival and to identify inter-island movements. Once again, my younger son Simon came to help but this year my elder son, Adam

(who had spent part of his babyhood on Bird Island in 1972) and his girlfriend Nicky also helped. In addition, Georges and Margaret Norah had kindly arranged for Eva Schumacher and Christoph Küffer to assist, along with Elsa Richard, the island staff member who has taken over the conservation role on the island. So our team of seven set about the hunt for ringed birds!

In most years we have caught 150-250 ringed birds, which represents

(according to Paul Doherty, the statistician who analyses the data) about 8-14% of the ringed birds in the colony. This is sufficient to gain a basic estimate of annual adult survival. But Paul maintains that for more sophisticated analyses, such as an estimate of adult survival each year, and to estimate survival of young birds between fledging and their return to breed 6 or more years later, we need to catch about 30% of ringed birds each year. I have maintained that this



is not possible, but in the event, in 2003 we caught 334 ringed birds, probably closer to 20% of those available to be caught. This important finding illustrates that with more assistance and with more time being devoted to searching, we could make even better use of the unique resource that Bird Island's ringed Sooty Terns represent.

Before my departure I counted the number of eggs in 30 marked

plots within the colony. For the second year running, Nature Seychelles, this year represented by Ian Valmont and Catherina Onezia, counted chicks in these plots at the end of August, just before fledging. This gave an estimate of fledging success in 2003 of 71 %. This is high (Georges and Margaret felt that this was one of the best years they had experienced) and was achieved despite heavy rain during the fledging period.

Two papers will appear shortly, one on sound production in a Sooty tern colony, to appear in *Waterbirds*, and a first estimate of annual survival in this species, in *Ibis*.

As usual, thanks go to all who have made this study possible and we look forward to more progress in the years to come.

Prof. Chris Feare has been researching Seychelles Sooty Terns for many years, particularly Bird Island's sooties.

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## Probable Round Island Petrel on Cousin

On 27<sup>th</sup> August, Kas Eikenaar (warbler researcher and keen birder) spotted an unusual petrel on the granite hillside on Cousin. The bird looked exhausted and was resting. Some photos were taken and have been circulated around seabird experts for identification.

The consensus is it was almost certainly a Round Island petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana* also known as the Herald petrel or Trinidad petrel. This is the first record of this species for the Seychelles, and quite a significant one as the species is quite rare

even in Mauritius. These petrels have been recorded associating with Wedge-tailed shearwaters, which could possibly explain its presence on the hill on Cousin where thousands of Wedge-tailed shearwaters breed annually.

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## SSG coordinator goes to Maputo...

by Rachel Bristol

No Maputo doesn't have seabirds worthy of noting but it did host the 3<sup>rd</sup> Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) Scientific symposium. The Symposium's theme was "Advances in Marine Sciences in Eastern Africa: Multi/trans-disciplinary Research for Improved Management of Resources." Seabirds are very **MARINE** so I thought I'd send in an abstract and see if they accepted it... so I did and they did!

I presented results of research and conservation of seabirds in Seychelles. More specifically I spoke about the vast numbers and importance of the seabirds we have in Seychelles, the problems these seabirds face, recent research that has, and is, being done and priority seabird research, monitoring and action for the future. I also spoke about the SSG, how stakeholders had organised themselves as the SSG and the contribution the SSG was having in seabird research and conservation in Seychelles.

There were over 100 scientists at the 3 day symposium and many papers were presented on a wide range of coastal and marine issues. I met seabird researcher Matthieu Le Corre from Reunion who spoke about his current seabird research. We discussed undertaking joint seabird projects and hope to draft a joint project to present to Marine Science for Management (MASMA) for funding by March 2004.

## Summary of seabird surveys on several islets

by Ian Valmont

Surveys were carried out in early September and included Iles Cocos, Iles La Fouche, Cachée, Round (Mahé) and St Pierre (Praslin). Of all the above, only Cocos and La Fouche showed encouraging breeding sites for several seabirds like Bridled tern, White tern, White-tailed tropicbird, Lesser noddy, Wedge-tailed and Audubon's shearwaters

(although landing on La Fouche was not possible due to bad weather, but the boatman steered very close by the islet). As for Cachée, it appears the islet has rats (*R. norvegicus*) the likely reason for the lack of breeding seabirds. Apart from a few White terns nesting on St. Pierre, no other seabirds were found there. St. Pierre (Praslin) and Round (Mahé)

possibly have too much human disturbance for viable seabird populations to establish. Despite efforts made to land on Beacon, persistent bad weather (particularly rough sea and heavy rain) made the attempts impracticable. However, quite an interesting Bridled tern colony and other seabirds were observed through a pair of binoculars.

The table below shows a summary of seabird species on the islets.

Islet	White Tern	White-tailed Tropicbird	Lesser Noddy	Brown Noddy	Bridled Tern	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	Audubon's Shearwater
Cocos	X	X	-	-	X	X	X
La Fouche *	X	X	X	?	X	?	?
St. Pierre	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cachée	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Round (Mahé)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Beacon *	X	?	?	?	X	?	?

Key

X= Definite presence of the species

? = Possibly (see \* below)

\* = Bad weather prevented landing; observed through binoculars

### Who are the SSG?

Aldabra Atoll (Seychelles Islands Foundation) - Lindsay Chong-Seng  
 Aride Island - Michael Betts  
 Bird Island - Guy Savy  
 Cousin Island - Joel Souyave  
 Cousine Island - Quentin Hagens  
 Frégate Island - Steve Hill/Beate Sachse  
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