

A FISHERMAN'S GUIDE TO
US VIRGIN ISLANDS
SEABIRDS



IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, INCREASING POPULATION AND TOURISM HAVE LED TO RAPID INCREASES IN HUMAN USE OF THE OCEAN SURROUNDING OUR ISLANDS AND CAYS.

Seabirds spend most of their time at or near the ocean. Depending on their habitat needs, seabirds select nesting sites along shorelines in vegetated and rocky terrain. Many of the uninhabited islands and cays of the Virgin Islands are characterized by rugged terrain not easily accessible to humans. Many islands are free of natural (peregrine falcons, red-tailed hawks, crabs) and introduced (rats) predators and provide the necessary space, solitude and nesting habitat for seabirds.

As people move closer to remote coasts and offshore cays, colonial nesting seabirds lose the habitat needed for nesting. Those birds that survive may alter their natural behaviors. If disturbed early in the breeding season, some birds will abandon their colony and nest, leaving eggs and chicks unprotected.



▲ BRIDLED TERN GUARDS ITS EGG IN ROCK CREVICE



▲ BROWN NODDY TENDS ITS NEST ON CLIFF EDGE, TURTLEDOVE CAY



▲ BROWN BOOBY CHICK IN NEST

▼ BROWN PELICAN IN BREEDING PLUMAGE FORAGES FOR FISH





BOOBIES

Sleek-plumaged birds with long bills that fly over the ocean, gliding in groups and dive into the water, very spectacularly, in pursuit of fish and squid. Their fossils date back at least 20 million years. The brown booby is the most common in the Virgin Islands.



FRIGATEBIRDS

Frigatebirds spend most of their time at sea. They are great gliders and can stay in the air for hours without needing to flap their wings. They cannot swim and catch prey at the water's surface and often steal food from other birds. They wander throughout their range but they are not migratory.



PELICANS

These large birds are found along the coasts and inland. They use their bills as fishing nets and are highly adapted for swimming and diving. Pairs of pelicans are monogamous while breeding.



SHEARWATERS

These seabirds come to the land only to breed and lay 1 egg in a burrow or rock crevice. They feed on small fish, squid, and other organisms on the sea surface. They are adapted to drinking saltwater and may die of thirst if only freshwater is available.



GULLS, TERNS, and NODDIES

Gulls, Terns and Noddies generally nest in colonies on the ground. Gulls are larger than terns and noddies and feed off the surface of the water. Most terns hover and dive into the water to catch their prey. Many local fishers confuse terns and noddies with boobies.



TROPICBIRDS

Tropicbirds spend most of their life at sea except when nesting, and feed primarily on squid and fish. When landing, Tropicbirds make various attempts before landing on the sea cliffs where they nest because their legs are far back on their bodies and do not allow them to perch.

Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*)



Brown plumage with a white breast. Male has greenish-yellow bill. Females are larger than males and have yellow bill. Breeds primarily in fall/winter. *Nests on Sula, Cockroach, Frenchcap, Dutchcap and Kalkun Cays.*

Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*)

PHOTO: FRANCISCO DALLMEIER



Adult birds have blue bill and red feet and 2 plumage phases, white and brown. Their white tail is a distinguishing feature. Juveniles are light brown. Breeds primarily in summer/fall. *Nests on Dutchcap Cay.*

Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)



Adult birds are white with dark brown or black flight feathers and a dark tail. Yellow bill and yellow-gray feet. Females and males are similar in appearance. Breeds primarily in winter/spring. *Nests on Cockroach and Sula Cays.*

Magnificent Frigatebird, Man-O-War (*Fregata magnificens*)



Long forked tail. Males are completely black except for a red gular (throat) pouch that inflates to attract females. Females have white breast and throat. Juveniles have white head. Lays 1 egg in stick nest in shrubs. *Nests on Tobago Island (BVI). Roost in Booby colonies.*

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

PHOTO: DON KREUTER



Large brown bird with white head and large bill. While breeding, adults may have a reddish brown neck and yellow head feathers. Immature birds are grayish brown with white underside for first 3 years. Lays 1-3 eggs in stick nest in trees or low vegetation. May nest year-round. *Nests on Congo, Whistling and Dutchcap Cays, Mary's Point (St John), Buck Island (St Croix). Smaller less frequent colonies on Hans Lollick, Inner Brass, and Thatch Cays.*

Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*)



Small bird with dark brown feathers above and white underside. Chicks look like giant gray puffballs. When not attending their nests, adults are found well out to sea. Nocturnal breeders and nests are hard to find. Breeds December to June. *Nests on Saba, Frenchcap, Flat, Cockroach and other cays with suitable habitat.*

SEABIRD ID GUIDE

Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*)

PHOTO: KEVIN T. EDWARDS



Adults have dark gray to black head, bill, and wings, and a white tail. During breeding season bill is dark red. White underside, throat, and line around eyes. The only gull that nests in VI is widespread between April and September. *Major colonies on Saba, Turtledove, Flat, Dog, Flanagan, Little Hans Lollick, and Buck Island (St. Thomas). Smaller colonies on numerous other cays.*

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)



Large white tern with orange bill and a short, forked tail. Black crest on back of head except during breeding season. In USVI, lay 1 large, spotted egg in nest in low grass or sand, usually with sandwich terns. Young crèche like sandwich tern young. Breeds May to July. Breeds April to July. *Nests on Dog, Turtledove, and Pelican Cays, sometimes on Flat Cay and Little Hans Lollick.*

Bridled Tern (*Onychoprion anaethetus*)

PHOTO: JORGE SALIVA



Dark grayish-brown plumage above and white below with white collar and forehead, and black cap. Nests in small groups, mostly under vegetation or under rocks. Breeds May to July. *Nests on Dog, Flanagan and Saba Islands, Turtledove, Flat, Frenchcap, Cricket, and Kalkun Cays, and Carval and Booby Rocks.*

Roseate Tern, Pilinki bird, Bonito bird (*Sterna dougallii*)



Small white bird with a long forked tail, pale gray plumage and red legs. While breeding, it has a black cap and black bill with red at its base. Usually nests in large colonies in rock depressions or under vegetation. Breeds May to July. *Preferred islands for nesting: Shark, Kalkun, Flanagan, Leduck, Saba, Flat, Pelican, Rata, Two Brothers.*

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*)



Medium-sized white bird with very pale-gray plumage, black legs and feet. Black bill with yellow tip, but some individuals have dull yellow bills. Black scruffy crest during the breeding season. Chicks form tight groups called crèches. Lays 1 spotted egg in dense colonies. *Nests on Dog, Turtledove, and Pelican Cays. Sometimes on Flat Cay and Little Hans Lollick.*

Sooty Tern, Booby bird (*Onychoprion fuscatus*)



Dark brown plumage above and white below. Forked, black tail with white streamers on outermost tail feathers. Breeds April to August laying 1 egg on ground under vegetation. *Nests on Saba, Turtledove, Flat and Frenchcap Cays.*

Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*)

PHOTO: KEVIN T. EDWARDS



Smallest tern in the VI. Black cap with a v-shaped white forehead, black-tipped yellow bill, and orange legs and feet during breeding season. Non-breeding adults have brown bills and less distinctive white foreheads. Nests on beaches and salt flats; occasionally on dirt and gravel beds and industrial sites. Breeds April to July. *Nests on Ruth Cay and Buck Island (St. Croix) and 14+ sites on St. Croix proper.*

Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*)



Dark brown, medium-sized tern with a silvery-white cap. Lays 1 lightly spotted egg on cliff edge or under rocks. Only tern that nests in trees in the VI (Frenchcap). Breeds May to August. *Nests primarily on Saba, Turtledove, Flat, Frenchcap, Kalkun, Cricket, and Carval Rock.*

Red-billed Tropicbird, Buoy Bird (*Phaethon aethereus*)



White with 2 very long tail feathers, bright red bill, black barring on the back, black line across each eye, and a black band across back of neck. Lays 1 purplish-brown egg on the ground in rocky crevices or under dense vegetation. Breeds October to May. *Nests on Cockroach, Dutchcap, Kalkun, Inner Brass, Hans Lollick, Congo, Mingo, Grass, Carval Rock, and other small cays with suitable habitat.*

White-tailed Tropicbird, Long-Tail (*Phaethon lepturus*)

PHOTO: JUDY PIERCE



White with very long tail feathers, black wing tips and heavy black stripes on upper wings. Black line across each eye and yellow-orange bill. Nests similar to red-billed but found on larger islands in rock crevices in isolated sea cliffs or remote cays. Breeds primarily between March and August. *Nests primarily on Water Island, Congo, and Hans Lollick. Several pairs nest on cliffs on the southside of St. Croix proper.*

GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING HOOKED SEABIRDS

Flocks of seabirds circling over the water and diving signal the presence of schools of fish, targeted by both birds and fishermen. Seabirds that are fishing near fishermen, or trying to eat fish discarded from vessels often become hooked and entangled in fishing gear. Entanglement in fishing hooks and line is one of the leading causes of death and injury to seabirds.

IF YOU ACCIDENTALLY HOOK A SEABIRD WHILE FISHING:

1 **DON'T CUT THE LINE!** Slow the vessel down or stop. Slowly bring the bird toward the vessel. **DO NOT** pull on the leader; this could cause more damage to the bird.

2 Lift the bird out of the water with a dipnet if available, or support the bird's weight when you bring it aboard. When handling the bird, be careful not to squeeze too tightly or hold its beak completely shut or the bird may suffocate.

3 Locate the hook and push the barb to the outside of the skin. Cut the barb then back the hook out.

4 Ensure that all fishing line has been removed and that the bird is otherwise uninjured before releasing. If the bird is injured, bring it to a local veterinarian or call the Division of Fish and Wildlife (St Thomas) at 340-775-6762 or (St Croix) 340-772-1955.

PERSONAL SAFETY TIPS:

USE CAUTION WHEN HANDLING BECAUSE BIRDS ARE STRONG AND HAVE SHARP BEAKS THAT CAN BITE HARD.

.....~.....
WATCH YOUR EYES AND CONTROL THE BEAK TO AVOID INJURY TO YOURSELF.

.....~.....
IF YOU ENCOUNTER A HOOKED SEABIRD THAT CANNOT BE CAUGHT WITHOUT COMPROMISING YOUR PERSONAL SAFETY, LEAVE IT, AND PLEASE CALL THE DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE (ST THOMAS) AT 340-775-6762 OR (ST CROIX) 340-772-1955.



JUVENILE MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD



MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD CAUGHT IN FISHING LINE

SEABIRD REGULATIONS



PHOTO: KEVIN T. EDWARDS

USVI SEABIRD REGULATIONS

- Hunting, trapping, or taking of any seabirds or other wildlife or part thereof, including eggs, is strictly prohibited.
- Importation, release or introduction of any animal or plant species to the offshore islands and cays is prohibited. Non- native species can destroy bird nests and eat the birds and/or their eggs, leading to seabird population decline.
- Access to seabird colonies is by special use permit from the USVI Government only. The Division of Fish and Wildlife maintains signs on the important seabird cays to limit foot traffic to the seabird colonies.
- Federal and Territorial laws prohibit the take, catch, or possession (or any attempt to do so) of any endangered or threatened species or migratory birds without a valid permit for scientific research activities. These activities are the only activities that may be permitted.
- Territorial law also requires a valid permit for scientific research activities related to the take, catch, possession (or any attempt to do so) of indigenous (native) species.
- No person may operate a helicopter or fixed wing aircraft over a seabird rookery at an altitude of less than 1,000 ft or approach such island or cay within one-half mile.

THE DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE HAS DESIGNATED ALL VIRGIN ISLAND GOVERNMENT-OWNED OFFSHORE ISLANDS AS WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES. LIMITING ACCESS TO THESE IMPORTANT SEABIRD ISLANDS AND CAYS IS ESSENTIAL TO THE PROTECTION OF THE COLONIES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS TO DISCOVER AND APPRECIATE.



SEABIRD LIFE HISTORY

Seabirds are so called because they spend most of their lifetime at sea. Seabirds have developed different fishing methods such as plunge diving by tropicbirds and surface fishing and piracy by frigatebirds. All seabirds breed on land and most return to the same breeding grounds to nest year after year. Many seabirds can live more than 30 years and are characterized by delayed maturity, low reproductive rates, and slow chick growth. Most seabirds in the U.S. Virgin Islands have a distinct breeding season. Most seabirds nest in a large colony, which makes them more vulnerable to disturbance from natural and human events.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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Funding for this project was provided by the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Caribbean Field Office. Special thanks to Dr. Judy Pierce of DPNR DFW and Dr. Jorge Saliva of USFWS.

COVER PHOTO BY GABRIEL LUGO

*Cover image shows White-tailed Tropicbirds in aerial courtship display
All photos provided by the USVI Division of Fish and Wildlife, unless otherwise noted.*



PHOTO: KEVIN T. EDWARDS