

## **Red-footed Boobies nest for the first time on Bird Island**

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Accounts of Bird Island by some of the earliest European visitors suggested that Masked and Brown Boobies were breeding. Masked Boobies continued to do so until the 1930s but human appetites and alteration of the island's vegetation doubtless contributed to their disappearance. Both species nested on the ground, rendering them highly vulnerable to human predation, and to the replacement of much of the island open space with plantations.

During the Sooty Tern breeding seasons of 1972 and 1973, when I lived on Bird Island for a total of nine months, single juveniles of both species occasionally flew over the island, but these were rare and, for me, exciting events. Occasionally, single juvenile Red-footed Boobies were seen in late evening among the 40 or so frigatebirds that roosted in the tops of tall Casuarina trees.

Since 1992 I have been fortunate to be able to visit the island almost every year during the Sooty Terns' breeding season. While there have been vegetation changes since the 1970s, with more open space provided for Sooty Terns and the former coconut plantation allowed to develop into broad-leaved woodland, the island has continued to provide habitats that support huge numbers of breeding seabirds. In addition, the number of roosting frigatebirds, mainly Lesser Frigatebirds but always with some Greater Frigatebirds, has greatly increased – some can be seen sleeping or sunning themselves throughout the day in the tops of the Casuarinas but numbers swell in the evening, with sometimes 500 or more.

From 2003 onwards, one or more Red-footed Boobies, mainly juveniles, have been seen roosting with the Frigatebirds in the evenings. In 2015, 66 Red-footed Boobies were counted on one evening but fewer were present in 2016 and 2017, and none were seen in 2018. In 2019, however, daytime counts exceeded 100 and we noted that in the evening more arrived from the north-west. Our maximum count was 510 birds, but small groups were still arriving as the dwindling daylight prevented further observations. In 2021 a daylight late afternoon count revealed 980 Red-footed Boobies in the Casuarinas, most of them in tightly packed groups along high branches of the Casuarina trees, and including several birds in adult plumage. This was a truly amazing sight and generated hopes that, at some stage in the future, the Red-footed Booby might be added to the list of Bird Island's breeding seabirds.

On 27 October 2021, Christine received a telephone call from Darrel Isaac, one of Bird Island's staff who had, among other duties, taken on the role of wildlife guide for visiting tourists. During one of his tours he had seen what he thought was a Red-footed Booby sitting on a nest high in a Casuarina tree. His enthusiasm was such that, without any sophisticated climbing gear, he climbed the tree, complete with camera, so that he could look into what he assumed to be a nest. It was! And it contained a down-covered chick! He also discovered a second nest that he thought contained an egg, but couldn't be certain of that. Well done Darrel for being so observant, and for going that extra mile (well, climbing many feet) to obtain proof of breeding!



The first Red-footed Booby nest on Bird Island, with a Frigatebird nearby (Photo: Darrel Isaac)



The adult sitting on its nest (Photo: Darrel Isaac)



The adult with its chick just visible (Photo: Darrel Isaac)



The first Red-footed Booby chick to have been reared on Bird Island (Photo: Darrel Isaac)

Since my 1990s visits to Seychelles, when Red-footed Boobies nested only on Seychelles southern atolls, especially Aldabra and Cosmoledo, the number of birds breeding in Seychelles has increased and their breeding range has extended northwards to include islands

in the Amirantes archipelago. It seems likely that they formerly nested on some of the more northern islands, including some in the granitic Seychelles group. However, these may have been lost through predation by humans and introduced predators, and habitat change.

Let's hope that Red-footed Boobies find Bird Island an acceptable place to rear their young, and that Darrel's discovery is the first of many breeding attempts.



Darrel safely back on the ground after his amazing discovery