Indian Ocean Seabird Group

Newsletter n°12

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IOSG NEWSLETTER n° 12

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EDITO

Dear seabird lovers, here is the twelfth issue of the Indian Ocean Seabird Group newsletter!

As usual, we have seabird news from all the region including Madagascar, Seychelles, Australia, Réunion and India.

Many thanks to all the contributors and please continue to send us your articles.

Enjoy the reading and we look forward to receiving your next contributions.

Sabine & Matthieu

ANNOUNCEMENTS

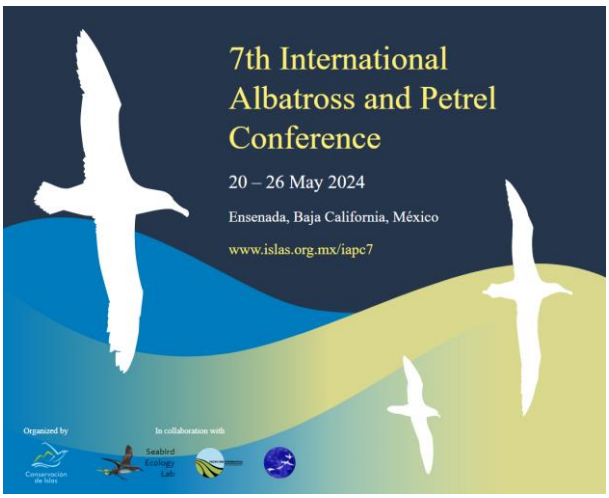
51st annual meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group

The annual meeting will be held in Seattle on 21 to 23 February 2024 and the theme will be "Faces of seabird conservation".

Early bird registration is now open.

More information here:
https://psg.wildapricot.org/Annual-Meeting

7th International Albatross and Petrel Conference



IAPC7 will be hosted by the Mexican environmental NGO Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas (GECI) in collaboration with Pacific Rim Conservation, the Seabird Ecology Lab, University of Barcelona and The World Seabird Union.

More information here:
https://acap.aq/fr/actualites/meetings-and-events/iapc7-7th-international-albatross-and-petrel-conference

MEMBERS CONTRIBUTIONS

1°) Massive poaching of Red-tailed Tropicbirds (*Phaethon rubricauda*) at Nosy Ve, Toliara, Madagascar

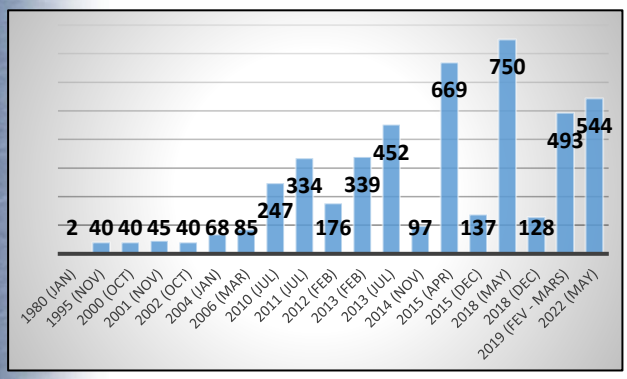
Anasvaler Mbelomanana, Matthieu Le Corre, Amelie Landy Soambola, Etienne Bemanaja & Felirija Andrianatoavina

Nosy Ve (23°37 S; 43°34 E) is a small (30 ha) tropical islet located 3.5 km off the village of Anakao, 40 km south of Tulear, Madagascar. It is a sacred islet (Fady) and the only known breeding

site of the Red-tailed Tropicbird in Madagascar. As a sacred islet, no hunting or egg harvest is allowed and people are not permitted to camp on the islet.

Nosy Ve is managed by the local association FIMIMANO (FIkambanana MIaro sy MAmpandroso an'i Nosy Ve) since 1998. Since 2019, the islet is included in the PIC Project (Pôles Intégrés de Croissance). The PIC conducts numerous actions in the Country to improve the quality of ecotourism offers (strengthening management structures, upgrading infrastructures, capacity building of stakeholders and operational management, more information here: https://www.pic.mg/).

Rats have been eradicated from the island in 2000 by the NGO Frontiers, and since that time the Red-tailed Tropicbird population has increased from 20 pairs in the 80ies to more than 750 pairs in 2018. This great conservation success is undoubtedly due to the community-based protection of the islet (the Fady) and to the eradication of rats. Nosy Ve is currently the only seabird breeding place in Madagascar with such a positive trend. It is also one of the very few islands of the Indian Ocean where visitors can admire this spectacular species.



Numeric evolution of Red-tailed Tropicbird population at Nosy Ve.

Pair of Red-tailed Tropicbirds in chick breeding at Nosy Ve (© Anasvaler Mbelomanana).

However, this situation may change abruptly. On early January 2023 fishermen of Anakao found evidences of a massive poaching event. According to members of FIMIMANO, local authorities and to the Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy, about 80 dead adult Red-tailed Tropicbirds were found, most at an illegal camp place and others scattered over the island. All birds showed obvious signs of poaching (broken wings, body removed). Among these dead adults, at least five were banded. They have been banded by us on the island between 2010 and 2019.

Local authorities and the police conducted an investigation and arrested nine fishermen from another village suspected of having committed this poaching. The suspects were temporarily placed into custody, and then finally released because of lack of sufficient charges against them. Various measures have been taken to deal with this situation. First of all, the local authorities set up a police station in the village to strengthen the security of the region, including Nosy Ve and its biodiversity, in collaboration with the FIMIMANO. The monitoring and control of visits and passages to Nosy Ve are thus reinforced. A public awareness campaign in favour of biodiversity and tourism will be conducted locally.

The restructuration of FIMIMANO may be needed, by involving the population of neighbouring villages (Soalara-Sud, Saint Augustin, ...) in the management of Nosy Ve. We all hope that this massive poaching will never happen again!

Corpses of red-tailed tropicbird, at Nosy Ve (© Anakao Municipality).

Visit of the FIMIMANO and local authorities investigating the causes of the massacre of red-tailed tropicbirds, at Nosy Ve (© Anakao Municipality).

2°) Have seabirds benefitted from the eradication of Common Mynas on Denis Island, Seychelles?

Chris Feare & Christine Larose

The eradication of Common Mynas from Denis Island, Seychelles, completed in 2015, was aimed at securing populations of four Seychelles endemic land bird species that had been introduced to Denis Island to establish insurance populations. The eradication achieved this objective (Bird Conservation International pp. 1 – 21.DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959270921000435), but in 2014, when few mynas were left, there were some indications that Lesser Noddies and White Terns might also be benefitting from the eradication. Two small (10-15 pairs) groups of Lesser Noddies bred for the first time, and White Terns, formerly nesting mainly in tall *Casuarina* trees, had begun nesting in lower vegetation and appeared to be more abundant than previously. We revisited Denis Island in July 2022 to see if there had been further changes in seabird populations.

Both founder Lesser Noddy colonies had increased substantially in nest numbers, with estimates of 650 and 530 nests, and in the number of trees occupied. All nests were in the canopies of tall trees, mainly *Terminalia catappa*, which had shed leaves as is normal during the south-east trade wind season.

Lesser Noddies nesting densely in the crown of a tall Terminalia tree, Denis Island, 30 July 2022 (© Chris Feare).

There have been no censuses of the White Tern population on Denis Island, but the subjective impression during our visit was that numbers had increased greatly since 2015, to the extent that the White Tern is now the most abundant, most widespread and most conspicuous seabird on the island.

We have no direct evidence that increases in both species resulted from the myna eradication. However, mynas are known predators of seabird eggs and pairs of mynas work together to disturb incubating birds, facilitating egg predation, as has been frequently seen on neighbouring Bird Island. Mynas might have prevented the initiation of successful breeding of Lesser Noddies, but they began breeding on Bird Island in the 1980s, in the presence of mynas. Once established, Lesser Noddies nest densely and exhibit communal defense when mynas approach nests, and larger colonies might thus be more resilient to myna presence. White Terns nest at lower densities; furthermore, they do not nest colonially or synchronously. During our 2022 visit all stages of breeding were apparent, from courtship to chick fledging. They have less tendency to mount communal defense and it is easier to understand how they might have benefitted from myna removal.

We are grateful to the owners of Denis Island and the NGO Green Islands Foundation for making our visit possible.

3°) Indigenous-led expedition to remote Salisbury Island, Western Australia in search of burrowing seabirds

Jennifer L. Lavers, Terrence Yorkshire Jr., Malachi Riley, Alaneo Gloor & David Guilfoyle

In Western Australia lies the Recherche Archipelago, a chain of more than 100 uninhabited islands extending over 230 km of pristine coastline. Most of the islands are difficult to access due to the lack of safe landing and the harsh conditions often offered up by the Southern Ocean. Of the islands, Salisbury stands out as one of the most remote and untouched, being 50 km offshore and requiring around 12 hours sailing from the nearest town, Kepa Kurl/Esperance. The remote location has meant Salisbury's natural history is relatively poorly documented.

Historical records suggest Salisbury is unlikely to be home to burrow-nesting seabirds. However, given the paucity of brief and often incomplete surveys (most recent was 1982) and abundance of seabird breeding islands in the immediate vicinity, we felt another survey could be beneficial. Furthermore, the dominant seabird species in the Archipelago, the Yowli/Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Ardenna carneipes*) is thought to be in decline, thus identifying which islands the species breeds on is essential to estimating total population size.

The survey team (center image) looking south-west over Salisbury Island, November 2022 (© Alaneo Gloor).

In late-November 2022 we set sail for Salisbury Island. We were hopeful the rough seas would be at our tail, but the winds swung around and from the moment we departed, it was clear getting to Salisbury wasn't going to be easy. As if to reinforce this message, almost as soon as we'd arrived at Salisbury we departed again, setting sail for Middle Island where we would meet a helicopter to evacuate one of our team members. Salisbury would have to wait another day.

Stunning vegetation along the southern ridgeline, Salisbury Island, November 2022 (© Jennifer L. Lavers).

At the top of the Salisbury's cliffs the following morning we stood, scratched and bruised catching our breath after pushing through dense, woody scrub. In total, it took our team eight hours to bush-bash our way across the island. After hours of searching for burrows large enough to fit a shearwater, we'd almost given up hope when one of our Indigenous Rangers (Terrence) alerted to the presence of three large burrows along the cliff edge. Anticipation was high, but alas, no shearwaters were home (despite it being the breeding season) and no additional burrows were detected.

Terrence and Alaneo documenting a White-bellied Sea Eagle nest in a cave high up on a cliff. Salisbury Island, November 2022 (© Jennifer L. Lavers).

Acknowledgements: Doc Reynolds (Senior Cultural Advisor), Captain Andy Edwards (*Keshi Mer*), Dr Tim Langois (University of Western Australia), and Matt Blyth (Millstream Productions). Funding provided by ETNTAC, National Environmental Science Program, and Our Marine Parks Grant.

4°) Not albino, an 'ino'. Farquhar Atoll of Seychelles reports an 'ino' Sooty Tern

Jake Letori, Aurelie Hector & Annie Gendron

There are over 232 thousand pairs of Sooty Terns (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) on Farquhar Atoll, located 770 km southwest of Victoria, the capital of Seychelles. The atoll is a hub for various seabird and shorebirds that breed and roost throughout the year.

With a team of three conservationists, the Island Conservation Society (ICS) monitors the different species on the atoll. It was during a fieldwork mission for a PhD student on Ile aux Goëlettes that the team spotted something unusual, an all-white Sooty Tern within the last cohort of fledglings.

The white Sooty Tern spotted (© Annie Gendron).

Sooty Terns are black on top and white below. The team managed to get closer and photograph the bird. Images were sent to the Seychelles Bird Record Committee for identification, and to experts at the Natural History Museum based in the United Kingdom. On closer inspection the bird had a creamy brown colour on its wings and tail feathers, resulting from a reduction in eumelanin (which causes black, grey and brown feathers), scientists from both countries agreed that the juvenile Sooty Tern expressed an 'ino' colour mutation, rather than an albino as originally thought.

'Ino' birds share similarities with albino birds, having red eyes, pale skin, beaks, and legs, but, due to a tiny amount of eumelanin in the eyes their vision is not compromised unlike albinos. Interestingly, due to the nature of this mutation, 'Ino' birds are always female. The team on Farquhar named her "Tidilé", meaning small milk. "Tidilé" was the first of its kind to be recorded on Farquhar Atoll since the conservation centre opening in 2015. The survival rate is higher in 'ino' birds compared to albino birds, therefore the team is hoping to see "Tidilé" return to Farquhar someday.

The white Sooty Tern spotted, expressing an "ino" color mutation (© Annie Gendron).

5°) A Barau's Petrel in an unsual place

Sarah Caceres, Jane Cozette, Frédéric Robert & Jean-François Cornuaille

On 9 March of 2021, a Barau's Petrel (*Pterodroma baraui*) was recorded with a Browning Dark Ops Pro XD trail camera at Piton Bleu, Plaine des Cafres, Le Tampon in Reunion Island (21°9'28.15''S, 55°33'27.67''E). The bird was recorded by trail camera during the night, between 00.43 and 1.03 hrs. The trail camera was located at an altitude of 1 705 m, at the top of a steep mound surrounded by a rivulet, in an upland tropical rainforest in which *Alsophila glaucifolia* (Cyatheaceae) and *Weinmannia tinctoria* (Cunoniaceae) are the dominant plants. The trail camera was placed at *c.* 30 cm height, aiming at the ground, and deployed from August 2019 to July 2022, as part of a study on Tailless tenrec (*Tenrec ecaudatus*).

Barau's Petrel photographed with a camera trap at Piton Bleu (© FDC 974 / OFB).

Barau's Petrels breed during austral summer, in the colonies on the massifs of Piton des Neiges and Grand Benare, between 2 200 and 3 000 m altitude. They join the colony in September, chicks hatch in December and fledge in April, and adults leave the chicks in late March. During the chick-rearing period, adults regularly travel from their colony to the ocean for foraging (Pinet 2012; Virion *et al.* 2021). Piton Bleu is located at 10 km from the nearest known colony for the species. This observation of Barau's Petrel has been the only one recorded at this site between August 2019 and July 2022 and no indication of nesting petrels was found.

This petrel may have been attracted by artificial lights (Le Corre *et al.* 2002; Chevillon *et al.* 2022), although the presence of a small unknown colony nearby cannot be excluded.

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6°) Knowledge and perceptions of local people towards seabird conservation in the Lakshadweep Islands, India

Ravichandra Mondreti

I interviewed 800 individuals (377 were females and 423 were males) in the Kavaratti Island, Lakshadweep archipelago, India (Fig. 1). Kavaratti is the nearest inhabited island, located at a distance of 24 km from the Pitti Island, a key pelagic seabird colony in the Eastern Indian Ocean. A previous study on illegal seabird egg harvesting (Mondreti *et al.* 2018) formed the foundation of the present work.

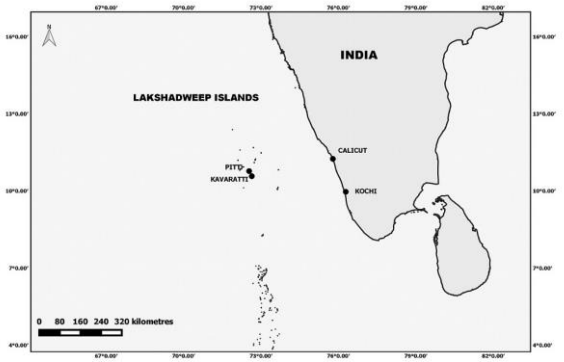


Fig.1. *Study area showing location of Pitti and Kavaratti islands within the Lakshwadeep Archipelago (India).*

Interviewees were asked the following questions 1. Whether they favoured seabird egg collection? 2. Whether seabird conservation is important for them? I used a structured questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions. Participants were between the ages of 14 and 80. Interviews were conducted in the native language with the help of a local translator and a field assistant.

During the survey, 576 (72%) participants acknowledged their involvement either in harvesting or trade of seabird eggs. 319 (40%) participants were either directly or indirectly involved in egg harvesting. However, a significant proportion (n=264, 33%) of the respondents were neutral in their support for seabird conservation. Most participants were in the age group of 25 and 64. 72% of middle-aged participants supported seabird conservation, while only 50% of young aged group participants did (Fig. 2). 39% of the middle-aged participants have supported egg collection while 35% of young participants did (Fig. 3).

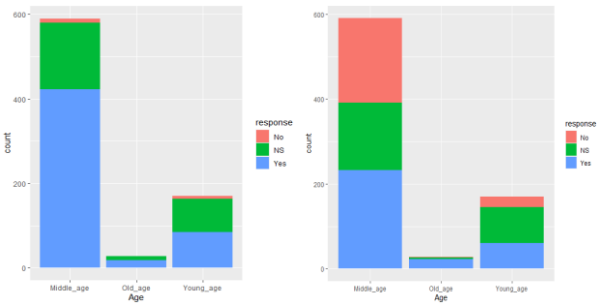


Fig.2(left). *Participant age groups [Young (18-24) – 170, Middle (25-64) - 590, Old (65 & above) - 28] and support for seabird conservation.*

Fig.3(right). *Participant age groups [Young (18-24) – 170, Middle (25-64) - 590, Old (65 & above) - 28] and seabird egg collection.*

84 % of male participants were supporting seabird conservation while only 47% of female participants were doing so (Fig. 4). 20% of the total participants belong to fisherfolk community, whose primary occupation was fishing. 97% of them supported seabird conservation (Fig. 5) while only 63% of fisherfolk supported egg collection (Fig. 6).

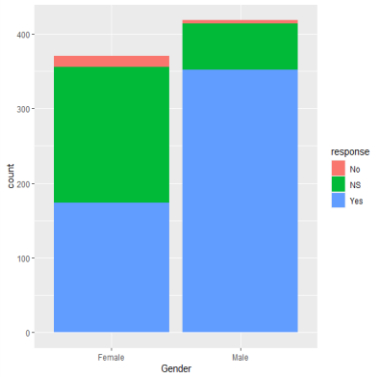


Fig.4. *Gender-wise support for seabird conservation.*

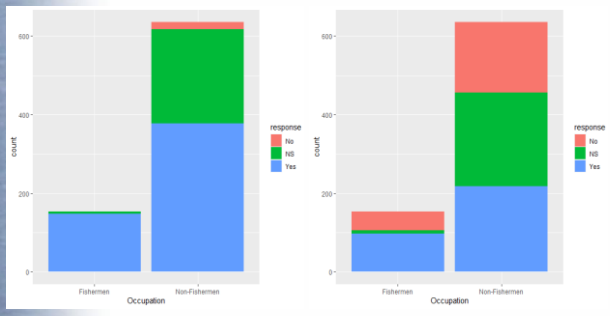


Fig.5(left)*. Relation between occupation and seabird conservation (fisherfolk 153, Non fisherfolk 635).*
Fig.6(right). *Relation between occupation and seabird egg collection.*

This study is a preliminary effort to understand peoples' perception towards seabird conservation. It indicates both the dependency of local people on seabird eggs while supporting seabird conservation.

The author has presented the study results in the 3rd World Seabird Conference (2021) and is currently working towards a peer reviewed manuscript.

7°) A first-year White-tailed Tropicbird travels 3000 km from Seychelles to Malvan, India

Mrugank Prabhu, Mark Brown & Hasan Khan

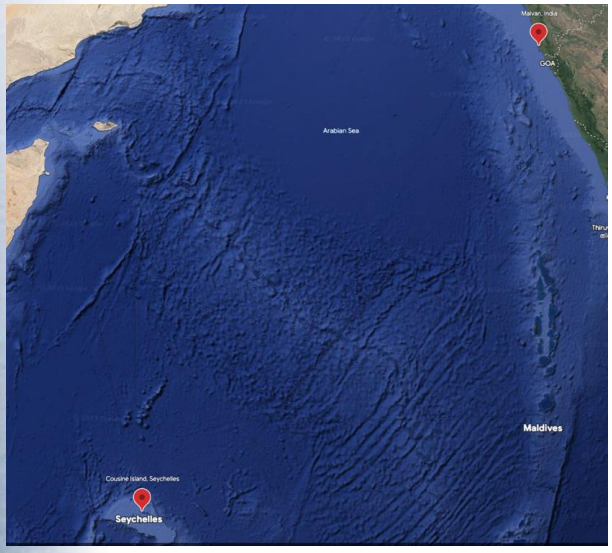
The White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*) is a majestic seabird known for its distinct white plumage and elongated tail feathers. It is primarily distributed across tropical and subtropical regions of the world's oceans. In the Indian Ocean, its range extends from the eastern coast of Africa to the islands of the Indian Ocean, including the Maldives, Seychelles, and the Chagos Archipelago. Along the Indian coastline, the bird is commonly sighted in the Lakshadweep Islands and occasionally in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Fishpool *et al.* 2021).

There have been sporadic sightings of the White-tailed Tropicbird along the Indian coast over the years. These sightings often occur during the bird's migratory period or when individuals are pushed closer to the coast by strong winds or storms.

Published records of sightings include a pair of birds in flight at Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu on the south-eastern coast of India on 1 April 1989 (Balachandran 1992); an exhausted immature bird found and rehabilitated 50km inland at Palavayal, about 84 km NE of Kannur town in northern Kerala, in January 2010 (Palot 2011); two sightings of an adult bird in February 2012 in pelagic waters off the north-western coast of India, in the northern Arabian Sea 121 km west of the coast of Maharashtra (Jamalabad 2013); specimens collected from Ross Island, Andamans, and far inland from Cachar, Assam (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005); a single bird seen by Lindsay J. McDougall, flying close to the beach at Kovalam, Kerala on 2 March 2006 (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011).

In one such similar incidence along the west coast of India following the biparjoy storm, a ringed White-tailed Tropicbird was recovered in Dhuriwada area, Malvan taluka of Sindhudurg district on 25th of June 2023. The bird was ringed as a chick by Mark Brown at Cousine Island in Seychelles on 20th May 2022, under the SAFRING programme. This was the first resighting of this bird since it was tagged in 2022. The approximate straight-line distance from ringing site to site of

capture in India is 3000km, the minimum distance travelled by the bird within its 1st year of age.



The White-tailed Tropicbird was initially ringed at Cousine Island (Seychelles) and recovered in Malvan (India) (© Chandravadan Kudalkar).

This is the first time that a banded White-tailed Tropicbird has been found along the Indian coast. The record also highlights the extent of the spatial need these birds can have between their breeding site and the non-breeding foraging movements. Systematic pelagic bird studies along the west coast of India would further aid in their conservation needs with respect to their wintering or foraging areas.

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8°) Cosmoledo seabirds on the rebound?

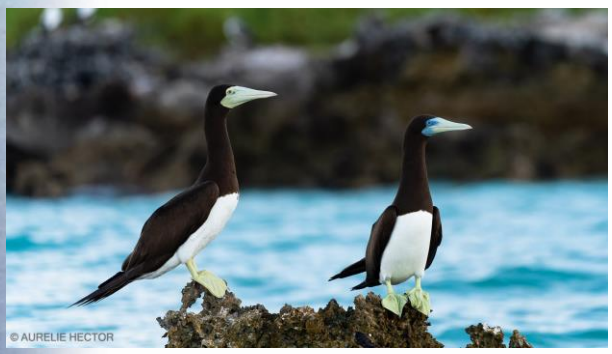
Aurelie Hector & Jake Letori

The 2023 southeast monsoon season on Cosmoledo Atoll, Seychelles has revealed encouraging seabird news, with interesting sightings and updated population estimates, a first in 10-20 years. This was possible through Island Conservation Society (ICS) staff; Aurelie Hector, Ricky Adeline and Jake Letori being stationed on Grande Ile.

The Sooty Tern team (© ICS).

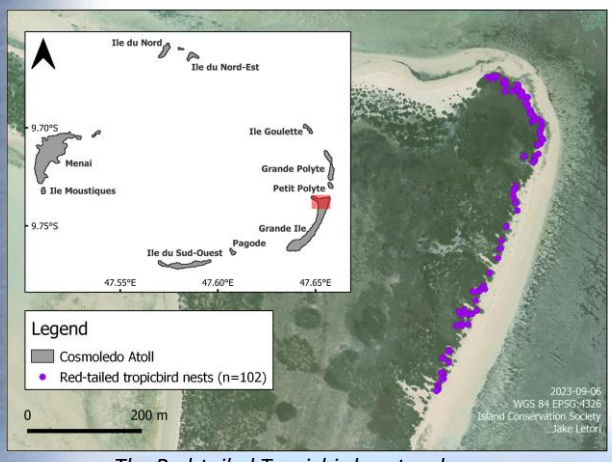
With the help of Joel Bonne from Blue Safari Seychelles, ICS successfully completed a Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) census, estimating 262 195 breeding pairs within a colony size of 13.72 hectares. Far from the estimated 1 million nesting pairs in the early 2000's, however being similar to the 2021 census results. For Masked Boobies (*Sula dactylatra melanops*), 4 326 breeding pairs were counted, with great inter-island differences in breeding across the atoll. In 2013, only seven nests were found on Grande Ile (a first since 1964) and now 10 years later in 2023 there were 304 active nests. The Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster plotus*) nests in lower numbers with 23 nests being counted, though a breeding pair on Grande Ile was a "premiere" for the species and also with a range of life stages observed over the past 6 months.

The circular plots deployed during the Sooty Tern census (© ICS).



Brown Boobies (© Aurélie Hector).

The positive news for species re-colonising Grande Ile is an outcome of the successful rat/cat eradication in 2007, showcasing the importance of invasive species removal. The ground nesting Red-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*) has also benefited from predator removal. Since May, breeding success monitoring has been ongoing on 102 nests along a stretch of coastline (ca 700 metres) on Grande Ile. At the end of September, 78 reached juvenile stage and had fledged, resulting in a 76.5% success rate. Tropicbird numbers were low in the past, however it is evident that the breeding population at Cosmoledo has rebounded.



The Red-tailed Tropicbird protocol map.

A Red-tailed Tropicbird of Cosmoledo (© Aurélie Hector).

With continued ICS presence on Cosmoledo, knowledge of its seabird populations will continue to strengthen in the future.

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Sabine Orlowski

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Call for contributions: You can send your articles for the next issue of the newsletter to Sabine or Matthieu from now! ☺

Guidelines: articles sent should be around 300-400 words, written in English, with at least one photo or figure (with credits and legend) to illustrate. Please indicate the author(s) and affiliation(s), and the e-mail address of the contact author. If your article is linked to a scientific publication, you can also include a reference of the paper at the end of the article.