

CREATUREFEATURE

Red-footed Booby



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FastFacts

- There are 9 subspecies of booby birds.
- Most abundant seabird on Christmas Island with 1,200 nesting pairs.
- They can dive to 30m in pursuit of fish.
- Red-footed boobies are described as one of the most polymorphic seabirds with respect to plumage colour.
- They have facial air sacs under their skin to cushion the impact when entering the water.
- They are strong flyers and can travel up to 150 km in search of food.

SpectacularDivers

The Red-footed booby feeds entirely at sea. Their body is adapted to the marine environment with exceptional diving capabilities. They are plunge divers, the most specialised method of hunting employed by sea birds. Plunge diving uses the energy from the momentum of the dive to combat natural buoyancy, allowing boobies to get to food deeper in the water column.

The bodies of these spectacular divers are well adapted to the task. They have dense plumage and a well-developed preen gland for waterproofing. Their long narrow wings are pointed and wrap around their very streamlined torpedo-shaped body, thereby reducing drag when they enter the viscous water. Even booby nostrils are adapted to diving, keeping water out when they plunge. The nostrils enter into the bill rather than opening to the outside directly forcing them to breathe through their mouth. Their eyes are angled forward, providing a wider field of binocular vision than in most other birds.

Red-footed boobies plunge after their prey after spotting them with their keen eyesight as they soar above. They are so nimble that they can snare flying fish from the air. At night, they dive for schooling squid that are visible due to their phosphorescence. Red-footed boobies feed communally and prey includes medium-sized fish and marine invertebrates, including cephalopods.

LATINNAME

Sula sula (Linnaeus, 1766)



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DistributionBreeding

The red-footed booby is dispersed widely across tropical and subtropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. They nest on coral atolls, volcanic islands and coastal areas in large colonies.

The species is monogamous and perform elaborate mating rituals that include squawks and the male's display of its blue throat. The males choose a nesting site, which they then defend through fighting and territorial displays. Females lay one chalky blue egg in a stick nest, situated in small trees or shrubs. Parents take turns incubating the egg for 44-46 days. The chicks require care and feeding by both parents for several months. It may be four months before the chick takes its first flight, and five months before they attempt an extensive flight.

ConservationStatus

The current conservation status of the red-footed booby is listed as '**Least Concern**' – **lower risk** category, under the IUCN Red list 2008. The biggest threat to the red-footed booby is the fishing industry, which reduces the availability of their food sources, and incidental catch, especially a problem with long-line fisheries. Coastal development is also a potential threat to the species.

Red-footed boobies nest on many of the islets and cays in the Coral Sea including East Diamond Islet.

Sources

- Photos of Red-footed booby chicks: Nicola Temple
- BirdLife International (2004). *Sula sula*. 2006.
- Harrison, Peter (1996). *Seabirds of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. www.iucnredlist.org

