

yesterday, today and tomorrow

Learning about the past, looking to the future

REEF Beat 9

Seabirds

Creature Features

- Feed and spend most of their time at sea
- Feathers are usually oiled, for water proofing
- Have webbed feet
- Excrete excess salt from special glands
- They have wings designed for long distance flying.

Birds of a Feather

Well we have finally reached what I consider to be the most beautiful of all reef creatures, not that I am biased or anything! Let me tell you about my extended family. There are 23 species of seabird that breed on islands and cays of the Great Barrier Reef including – terns, noddies, gulls, shearwaters, frigatebirds and boobies. Between 1.4 and 1.7 million of us breed on the Great Barrier Reef each year and the Reef has another 425 000 non-breeding seabirds, giving a grand total of more than two million of us visiting or living there. There are 55 islands and cays that play host to key seabird nesting sites in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

We eat lots of seafood, in particular small fish, squid and crustaceans, but some of us are scavengers and help to keep the Reef clean by eating dead animals and plants. Seabirds are very important to healthy island ecosystems, when we gather together in large numbers our droppings (guano) help to fertilise plants. We sometimes carry plant seeds attached to our feathers, this helps to introduce new plants to other islands and cays that we visit during our travels.



Red Footed Booby



Red-tailed Tropic Bird and Chick



Beach Stone Curlew

Human Impacts

Cyclones and bad weather are natural problems for us seabirds. Big waves and strong winds can destroy our nests. Bad weather can also make it very hard for us to catch food and sometimes parents cannot catch enough food to feed their chicks. Although we love people coming to visit us sometimes they are careless, they walk around the islands that we are nesting on and they can accidentally step on eggs that have been laid on the ground. If people make too much noise around nesting seabirds they can scare

parents away. Climate change is also affecting seabirds, as fish move further away from the coast to try to find cooler water, seabirds have to fly further to catch enough food to feed their chicks. Sometimes no chicks survive during extreme weather patterns when adult birds cannot find enough fish to feed them.



How you can help us

- Wherever possible keep well away from colonies of roosting or nesting seabirds
- If you cannot avoid going near a colony, always keep a low profile. This will minimise the risk of

disturbing birds. Stressed birds may move from their nests or chicks, or take flight, leaving their nest unprotected

- When approaching birds, be quiet, avoid rapid or sudden movements, crouch low and use existing cover where possible
- If seabirds exhibit stressful behaviour overhead, such as raucous calling or swooping, leave the area immediately
- When exploring be careful not to crush eggs and chicks — some are well camouflaged
 - Never attempt to touch birds, chicks or eggs
 - Keep noise to a minimum and avoid using lights near or in bird colonies.



Nesting Noddies and Terns



Seagull



Shearwater



Frigate Bird



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

www.gbrmpa.gov.au

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