



Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*

### ***Seabirds of the British Indian Ocean Territory***

The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) is estimated to support in the region of 180,000 pairs of at least 17 species of breeding seabirds<sup>1</sup> and has had over 33 seabirds species recorded there<sup>2</sup>. It has been recognised as an area of global importance by the designation of ten Important Bird Areas to date, all receiving this status due to the numbers of breeding, or congregating seabirds.<sup>3</sup>

The numbers of certain species of seabirds are thought to be suppressed by the presence of rats and cats. As a general rule, ground nesting seabirds that have limited defence mechanisms to counter predators, avoid or breed in low densities on islands where invasive species remain. In contrast, on rat-free atolls, such as the three islets in the mouth of Diego Garcia lagoon, spectacular numbers of seabirds breed.

The main concentrations of the two burrow nesting shearwaters, Wedge-tailed *Puffinus pacificus* and Audubon's *Puffinus lherminieri* are in the rat free atolls of the Chagos Bank, as are the ground nesting Brown Booby *Sula dactylatra* and Masked Booby *Sula leucogaster*. Five species of *Sternidae* tern breed in very low numbers on both rat-infested and rat free atolls. In contrast, Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata*, which cope with the depredations of terrestrial predators by nesting in intense densities, manage to breed on rat-infested islands where there is space for their large colonies.

The iconic bird of BIOT is the Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*. This magnificent member of the gannet tribe is the success story of the Chagos. In the 1970s it re-colonised mainland Diego Garcia after an absence of some 100 years and now breeds in its thousands in the Barton Point Nature Reserve. It also appears to be increasing on other atolls from which man has departed.

<sup>1</sup> Symens, P. (1999). Breeding Seabirds of the Chagos Archipelago. In: Sheppard, C.R.C, & Seaward, R.D. (eds), *Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago*. Linnean Society Occasional Publications 2.

<sup>2</sup> Carr, P. (2007). *A Preliminary Checklist of the Birds of the Indian Ocean Territory*. In prep.

<sup>3</sup> BirdLife International (2004). *Important Bird Areas in Asia: key sites for Conservation*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International (BirdLife Conservation Series No. 13).

The **Chagos Conservation Trust** is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561), whose aims are to promote conservation, scientific and historical research, and to advance education concerning the archipelago. The Trust is a non political association.

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