



*Championing UK's most special species:
the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and
Crown Dependencies (CDs)*

FACT-SHEET ON:

Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila*
UK Overseas Territory: Ascension Island

The Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* is the only remaining endemic bird of Ascension. Two other endemic bird species, known from the limited sub-fossil remains, became extinct after human settlement, as did many endemic species of other taxa.

The Frigatebirds catch prey while flying, generally over the ocean. This is probably in association with cetaceans and tuna schools that drive smaller prey species within their reach. The diet appears to consist almost entirely of flying fish but, during certain seasons, small groups can also be observed feeding on sea-turtle hatchlings and sooty tern chicks over land. Kleptoparasitism (the stealing of food from other birds) is known

to occur commonly but is not thought to result in a significant part of the species' diet. Adult males are completely black overall with a greenish tint and bright red throat pouch that inflates during courtship, adult females are completely black with a brownish tint and blue rings around their eyes. Juveniles are similar to the female but have a white head and chest.

Although the Frigatebirds do breed throughout the year, the peak season is September-November. A single egg is laid and both parents participate in the 45-day incubation. Chicks fledge at 6-7 months, but remain dependent on parents for a further 3-4 months post-fledging.

Ascension Island is located in the South Atlantic, just south of the Equator (7° 56'S, 14° 22'W), 1300 km away from its nearest neighbour, St Helena, approximately 1500 km from Africa, and 2250 km from South America. Being the only land in such a wide ocean-area, the island is one of the most important tropical seabird nesting stations in the Atlantic Ocean. It probably had several millions of breeding seabirds before the arrival of humans but, after the effects of the latter (see below), still supports some 500,000 pairs of 11 breeding species. These include the endemic Ascension frigatebird and a distinct sub-species of band-rumped storm petrel, along with boobies, terns, tropicbirds and noddies.

The island has a varied landscape, ranging from arid lava flows with no vegetation or only highly resilient plants to, within the Green Mountain region, a combination of woodland, grassland and scrubland, including a lush cloud forest. Ascension has deep inshore waters and no coral reefs. Ascension has a human population of 806 (2016). The Island has one of the world's most heavily invaded terrestrial ecosystems; more than 95% of plant species are introduced.

The Territory consists of the main island of Ascension, which covers an area of 88 km², and several smaller associated stacks and islets around the coastline, including Boatswain (pronounced



Above: Male with inflated pouch (left) and juvenile (right) Ascension Frigatebirds. Below: Boatswain Bird Island from the mainland opposite. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF



Part of the colony of Ascension Frigatebirds (with Masked Boobies) on Boatswain Bird Island. © Ascension Island Government Conservation Department

Bosun) Bird Island (<1 km²), which is the largest of these. It is the existence of this islet that prevented human actions leading to the extinction of the Frigatebird and the end of most of the other seabird colonies. Boatswain Bird Island covers an area of 5.3 hectares and fortunately has always remained rat- and cat-free, despite being visited by humans to mine guano (the dried bird excrement which used to provide the main source of agricultural fertiliser). The Ascension frigatebird, along with a species of petrel and several species of terns and boobies bred on the main island until the arrival of humans and the rats and cats that they brought with them. These caused huge declines in seabird populations, limiting most of them to a few small colonies offshore on islets, mainly Boatswain Bird Island, and inaccessible cliffs.

During the 1990s, UKOTCF coordinated efforts to secure funding to remove the feral cats from Ascension Island (with the agreement of animal welfare groups). Eventually, UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office (which leads on UKOTs) found funding to support this work. This Ascension Island Seabird Restoration Project was instrumental in setting up (in 2001) the Ascension Island Government's (AIG) Conservation and Fisheries Department, supported by guidance and expertise of overseas organisations. This now leads conservation efforts on-island. The project also established a formalised seabird monitoring programme, as well as tackling the threats to seabirds from introduced, invasive species. Led by then UKOTCF-member organisation RSPB, with the funding from the FCO, and support from UKOTCF and others, in 2001, a feral cat control programme was initiated, with pet cats being neutered, tagged and protected during the exercise. This involved the eradication of feral cats, the last of which was removed from Ascension's mainland in 2004, and the Island was declared feral cat-free in 2006. Effort continues to be placed into controlling rats.

Seabird recolonization of accessible mainland sites was first recorded in 2002 by Masked Boobies *Sula dactylatra* and the numbers have increased steadily since. Six of 11 species had recolonised by 2011 and, in 2012 a seventh species returned, with two pairs of endemic Frigatebirds spotted nesting on the mainland for the first time in around 180 years, increasing to 44 pairs making nesting attempts on the main island in 2014. The species was previously classified by IUCN as Critically Endangered. With the success of the restoration, it is now classified as Vulnerable, largely due to its very restricted breeding range.

Invasive alien species constitute the most immediate threat to the ecological integrity of the island. Over 95% of Ascension's flora is introduced and, whilst some coexist in this novel ecosystem, others have become highly invasive, posing a threat to the native biodiversity. Mexican Thorn (or Mesquite) *Prosopis juliflora* is one of the most aggressive, outcompeting native vegetation in the area that it invades, forming dense impenetrable thickets that limit access and provide food and habitat for high densities of rats. At least 9 introduced vertebrates, including rabbits, rats and feral sheep are present on the island, with cats and goats having previously been eradicated. Introduced black rats are still affecting breeding populations of seabirds and turtles. Climate change poses a potentially significant, but unpredictable, long-term threat. Poor runway conditions at RAF Ascension Island in April 2017 led to the cancellation of twice-weekly flights from there to the UK and the Falkland Islands. Although the runway is scheduled to reopen in 2020, the uncertainty led to the closing of the only hotel on the island in 2017.



Masked Booby with well-grown chick in July 2004: one of the first birds to rear young on the main island of Ascension after previously being restricted to Boatswain Bird Island. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF



Male (above) and female incubating egg (below): in November 2012, the first pair of Ascension Frigatebirds breeding on mainland since cat eradication. © Mark Cutts

