

Booby Birds

Having completed a rather depressing study of New Caledonia's endangered species as featured on bird stamps issued by the Office des Postes et Télécommunications (OPT), I thought that it might be more uplifting to look for some rather more positive messages amongst the stamp issues. I have this FDC from 2013 which features Masked Boobies (*Sula dactylatra*) on and flying over the Entrecasteaux Reefs, which are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site known as the Lagoons of New Caledonia (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1115>). UNESCO added the Lagoons to the World Heritage list in 2008. OPT commemorated this major event with a miniature sheet of six stamps, one 75F value of which also featured a Masked Booby.

2013 – Lagoons of New Caledonia - Entrecasteaux Reefs



The Lagoons which make up the World Heritage Site comprise six marine clusters, which are in turn also protected by marine and terrestrial buffer zones. The UNESCO website indicates that the lagoons form an “*outstanding example of high diversity coral reef ecosystems and form one of the three most extensive reef systems in the world*”. The OPT began to mark annually the existence of the UNESCO protection in the first of six stamps issued in 2009, featuring a Dugong marine mammal (75F) from the West Zone of the Heritage Site. OPT then moved on to the Great Northern Lagoon in 2010, with a stamp (75F) that shows a Humphead Wrasse fish, before visiting in 2011 the Ouvéa and Beautemps-Beaupré Lagoon (75F) which features a sea turtle. This latter stamp (image below) includes a bird in flight in the background, which Kjell Scharning identifies as a Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*).



Image source: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/newcaled.html>

In 2012, the 75F stamp featured Humpback Whales from the Great Southern Lagoon; and the final stamp issued in 2014 (110F) showcased the Northern coastal zone. Once again, this stamp includes a bird in flight, which Kjell Scharning suggests is another Red-footed Booby. The Booby is much more prominent in the marginal drawing of the sheetlet than it is on the stamp itself (see below).



Image source: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/newcaled.html>

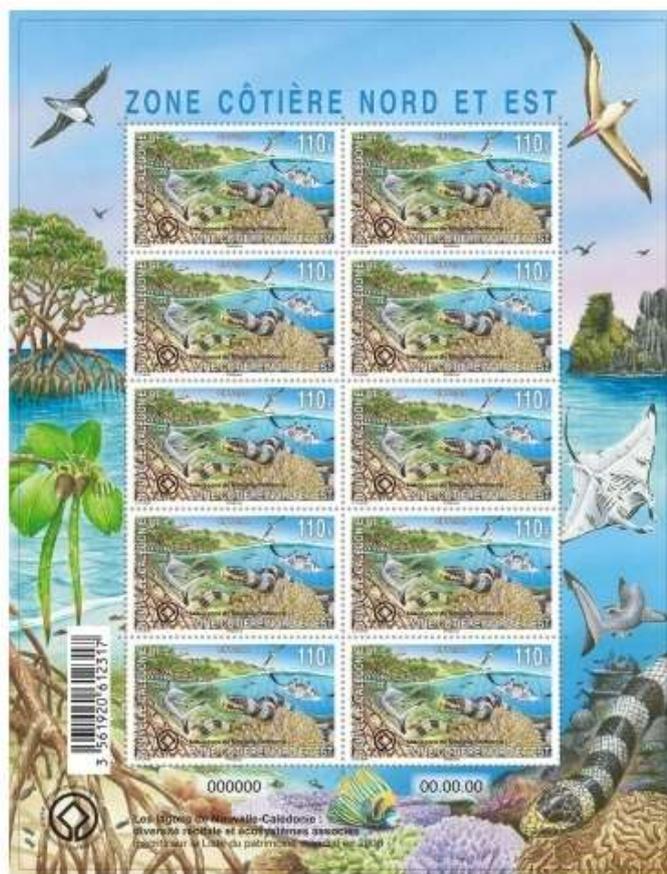


Image Source : <https://caledoscope.opt.nc/fr/timbres-et-philatelie/feuille-illustrée/unesco-zone-cotiere-nord-et-est>

Birdlife International distribution maps for both the Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*) and the Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*) show that these birds can be found in any of the tropical oceans across the

globe in a broad band centred around the Equator, roughly from the Tropic of Cancer (North) to the Tropic of Capricorn in the Southern Hemisphere. However, the Red-footed Booby has a more restricted range than the Masked Booby, which apparently has a very large flight range.

The Birdlife International data zone indicates that both the Red-footed Booby and the Masked Booby fall into the “Least Concern” category of the Red List. That is not to say that all is well: although the global population of the Red-footed Booby is estimated at over one million, it is suspected of being in decline, owing to various threats, including habitat loss, invasive species and hunting. There is apparently no accurate quantification of the global population for the Masked Booby, but again, this is also suspected of being in decline.

My interest in these birds was also sparked by the three new Booby Birds stamps from the Cocos (Keeling Islands), issued by the Australian Post on 12 May 2020 (see below). Australia Post is responsible for the stamp issues for this territory which is located in the Indian Ocean, between 2,750-2,940 km North-West of Perth: it is one of two Indian Ocean Territories, the other being Christmas Island. The islands cover 15.6 square kilometres and consist of two atolls and 27 coral islands. North Keeling is the northern most of the two atolls and includes the Pulu Keeling National Park, which is an important base for breeding birds, including the three boobies featured on the stamps. North Keeling Island is apparently the only seabird breeding area within a radius of 900 km (https://www.regional.gov.au/territories/Cocos_Keeling/enviro_heritage.aspx).

Cocos (Keeling) Islands – 12 May 2020 Booby Birds

Red-footed Booby



The background information on these birds supplied by Australia Post (<https://australiapostcollectables.com.au/stamp-issues/cocos-keeling-islands-booby-birds.html>) indicates that the Red-footed Booby, which is on one of the \$1.10 values, is “at approximately 70 centimetres in length, is the smallest of boobies. It is a predominantly white species. It is differentiated by its distinctive red feet, together with a pink and blue bill and throat pouch. North Keeling Island is home to one of the world’s most important colonies of this species, which is estimated to contain tens of thousands of breeding pairs. The Red-footed Booby differs from most other boobies by nesting in trees.”

Birdlife International also states that the Red-footed Booby is subject to illegal hunting on the Cocos Islands (for food) despite having legislative protection. A scientific abstract from 2004 (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/>), also referenced by Birdlife International, states that 2,000-3,000

Red-footed booby birds are victim to hunting each year, with outer estimates suggesting that as many as 10,000 may be killed in some years. The total estimated breeding population is now 30,000, confined to the uninhabited North Keeling atoll, whereas in the past, the bird was present throughout the islands. The practice of hunting the Booby dates from the first settlement in 1827.

Brown Booby



The Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*) which also features on a \$1.10 stamp, is a large bird measuring up to 85cm in length. Its plumage is a combination of distinctive chocolate-brown upper parts, and white underparts. Brown boobies nest on the ground and produce pale blue eggs. The total estimated number of Brown boobies is over 200,000. But once again, the population is suspected of being in decline, though not at a sufficiently rapid rate to (yet) raise the Red List category from "Least Concern" where it currently stands.

One other interesting assertion from Birdlife International was that the Brown Booby is very sensitive to disturbance from humans: a presence within 10-20 metres of the nest is enough to cause the birds to depart for pastures new.

The website of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (<https://www.cocoskeelingislands.com.au>) suggests that the Brown booby can often be found throughout the Cocos Keeling Islands.

Masked Booby



The commentary by Australia Post indicates that there is a small breeding population of Masked Boobies to be found on the North Keeling atoll, with the eggs laid from January to July. The Masked Booby is also similar in size to the Brown Booby.

The three stamp set is also accompanied by a miniature sheet (FDC below).

Cocos (Keeling) Islands - 12 May 2020 Booby Birds Miniature Sheet First Day Cover



I had intended to complete this article at this point, perhaps with reference to other stamp issues of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands that also featured Booby birds, like this 33c value of a Red-footed Booby from July 1985 (one of three bird stamps) or the 25c value from June 1999 of a Masked Booby which is from a sheet of 20 stamps that make up a "Living Mosaic".



Image source: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/cocos.html>

However, I made the mistake of mentioning this article in a conversation with my Dad and my sister. My sister Carlyne suggested that the article should include a note on the origin of the word “Booby” which, according to Galapagos Conservation UK (<https://galapagosconservation.org.uk/>), “comes from the Spanish word ‘bobo’, meaning foolish or clown – referring to their clumsy movement on land”. Ever the constructive critic, Carlyne also said that the article ought to include reference to the Blue-footed Booby (*Sula nebouxi*), presumably to counter-balance the inclusion of the Red-footed Booby. The Blue-footed booby is an important booby species found on the Galapagos Islands and has appeared on several stamp issues from Ecuador, including this 7000 sucres value from a set of 20 stamps issued to commemorate the Charles Darwin Foundation and issued in September 1999.



Image source : <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/ecuador.html>

The Blue-footed Booby is found along the Eastern Pacific coastline roughly from Mexico down to Chile.

At this point in our discussion, our Dad had had enough of listening to the two boobies in front of him and asked us to change the subject from birds, notwithstanding that he had enjoyed bird-watching with us on various occasions, but in this country and not abroad. So, this is where this article ends.

This narrative is dedicated to the memory of our Dad, John Ardron, who passed away peacefully within 12 hours of us having had this conversation.

Steven Ardron
6 July 2020