The Three Boobies of the Galapagos Islands

The Galapagos Islands are home to three very interesting birds, the Nazca booby, red-footed booby, and the blue-footed booby – three of the Earth’s six species of boobies. The name “booby” is derived from the Spanish word “bobo” meaning clown, after which they are named because of their strange ways and colorful attributes. Boobies are also called “piqueros” (Spanish for the way they dive).

The three species are very similar, yet have very distinguishable differences. They are not endemic to Galapagos, and can therefore be found in different places around the world. Boobies range from 25-36 inches in length, with a wingspan of 3-5 feet. All nest close to the ocean and even close to each other – yet don’t compete for food or habitat as they have their different habits. They all lay eggs (the numbers vary), and use their webbed feet to warm their eggs once they have been laid.

Blue-Footed Booby (Sula nebouxii)

The blue-footed is the most distinguishable of the species with its bright turquoise-blue feet. Over 70% of the world’s population of blue-footed boobies lives in Galapagos, while the rest can be found in around Southern California and even into Colorado. As with all boobies, the males can be distinguished by their voices – they have a pleasant whistle. Additionally, it is easy to distinguish the female blue-footed booby because of the dark ring of pigment around her pupil.

These birds nest around the center and outer edges of the archipelago. Just like the other boobies, they fish for food, but each species has their own fishing habits. As they dive, they hit the ocean straight on with immense force, and have air sacks in their skulls that help with the impact. This activity stands out the most with the blue-footed boobies, as they have longer tails, which helps them steer quickly and get out of the dive. This allows them to dive from up to 80 feet above the ocean and even into less than two feet of water. The blue-footed boobies fish close to shore, and enjoy sardines and squid.

They can be found doing their acrobatic courting dance on N. Seymour, Daphne, Espanola, San Cristobal, and Isabela. The famous “booby dance” is part of the amazing courtship ritual in which the boobies (mainly, and more extensively by the blue-footed boobies) practice. The male walks around the female, raising his bright blue feet straight up in the air, while bringing his “shoulders” towards the ground and crossing the bottom tips of his wings high above the ground. Plus he’ll raise his bill up towards the sky (“skypointing”) to try to win his mate over. The female may also partake in these activities – lifting her feet, skypointing, and of course squawking at her mate.

After mating, another ritual occurs - building the nest, which ironically is never used because they nest on the bare ground. They will trade off placing twigs or stones on the ground, or giving them to one another. When the eggs are ready to be laid, the nest is pushed away, and a ring of guano (excrement) is made around the nesting area – which is believed to specify their nesting territory to others. The blue-footed boobies nest all year round, unlike the others. Another difference is that they may lay up to three eggs (which are incubated by the male and female), and raise all three chicks if food supplies are good.
Nazca Booby (Sula granti)

All three boobies are similar in size, but the masked booby is the largest, with a wingspan of over five feet. The Nazca boobies (also known as the white or masked boobies) nest on the ground. They are often around cliffs, where they can take advantage of gravity by getting assistance when taking off into flight, which they need since they are the biggest, heaviest boobies. The Nazca booby catches fish in deep waters.

They are the only species with a set breeding cycle, from August – November (on Tower Island) and from November – February (on Espanola), and breed in large colonies. Nazca boobies lay two eggs several days apart, yet after they hatch they won’t both survive. These are one of the only birds in the world that practice siblicides (the killing of a sibling regardless of the food supply). After they are hatched, the chicks compete for food, and the strongest/older chick usually survives by shoving the youngest out of the nest. While still in eyesight of the mother, not receiving food, and being scorched by the equatorial sun, the weakest one dies. If the older chick dies, the younger one will then survive.

Red-Footed Booby (Sula sula)

There are more red-footed boobies than the others in Galapagos. This is smallest of all boobies (25-30 inches long), and is the only one to construct twig nests (up to four feet high) in trees and shrubs. Boobies are not endemic to Galapagos, and in fact, the red-footed booby can be found from Mexico to Ecuador, and far offshore, where they catch flying fish and stay clear of a predator, the hawk. The largest colony of red-footed boobies in the world can be found on Tower Island in the Galapagos, with over 140,000 pairs. The others in Galapagos can be found at Punta Pitt on San Cristobal. About 95% of the birds have brown feathers, while the other 5% have white.

The red-footed booby has a different breeding habit as well, laying only one egg and raising that chick. Red-footed boobies are very sensitive to changes in their food supplies. If they are unable to find ample amounts of food, they are known to abandon their eggs or chicks. On the other hand, when food supplies are plentiful, they are known to feed their chicks well past the fledgling stage.

“When one of them looked down its long beak at me it reminded me more than anything else of a circus clown in full regalia. The bill was greenish-yellow shading into blue at the tip, the base of the bill and narrow forehead pink, set off by jet black pigment behind. The skin around the eye was bright blue grey, the eye itself cadmium-yellow, framed by eyelids of clear forget-me-not blue. When the bright red feet were added to this, the harlequin effect was most striking. And with it all, the bird wore an air of anxious sobriety which heightened the bizarreness of the colour scheme.”

-William Beebe (1924)