**ASCENSION ISLAND SUPPLEMENT**

On the **22nd April,** after leaving **St Helena**, I noted that not much was seen in the way of birdlife. A **Bulwer's Petrel** and a storm petrel or two were apparently spotted before breakfast. However a pod of **Killer Whales,** called **Orcas** these days**,** was encountered fairly close to the ship.

The photo on the **right** was taken by **Graham Ekins**. It shows a male with a tall dorsal fin swimming with a female. The temperature soared to 30°C with a 15-20 knot SE wind. The barometer kept up a constant 1010Mbs for days. Beautiful **Cirrus** clouds draped the sky at midday – **see photo at the top of the page**.

On the **23rd April,** it was a stifling 36.5°C at midday and yet more **Cirrus** decorated the sky. Squadrons of small **flying fish** scattered from our bow wave and glinted in the sun like shards of silver. **Lydia Artiola** took the shot on the **right** which shows one of these fish launching itself into the air. The long lower lobe of the caudal fin is still thrusting away to get the fish airborne. The relatively huge pectoral fins do flutter and presumably provide some thrust although their main function is to generate the lift that keeps the fish in the air.

A **Pomarine Skua** was observed today, also **Cory's Shearwater** and the first **Ascension Island Frigate Bird**.

**24th April** began with squally showers but these cleared up as the morning progressed. We approached **Ascension Island** at dawn.

**Left**: A squall as we arrived at **Boatswain Bird Island**.

Parties of both **Masked** and **Red-footed Boobies** swept past us as we approached th**e** southern end **of Ascension Island** where **Boatswain Bird Island** is located. This stump of volcanic rock is a tropical seabird citadel and as we anchored, the air above us was stacked with **Ascension Island Frigate Birds** – an endemic species.

**Above: Frigate Birds** soaring over ***Plancius.*** Note the fading moon in the left hand photo, taken as the sky brightened. **Below: Ascension** with **Boatswain Bird Island** on the right hand edge.

**Right: Boatswain Bird Island** – an isolated stack standing at the southern corner of **Ascension**.

Although now eradicated, **cats** were largely responsible for exterminating nesting seabirds from the main island which, before the 19th Century was estimated to host *20 milllion breeding boobies*. **Cats** never reached this isolated rock, thus accounting for the large number of seabirds still nesting on it.

We took to the Zodiacs after breakfast and motored across the choppy sea to the calmer lee side of the island and had a good hour and a half tucked in under the stack with birds swooping all around us. Close to, it was an impressive place with clefts, a magnificent arch and numerous ledges on which the seabirds could establish their nests.

**Above:** A pale phase **Red-footed Booby** just clears our heads as it leaves its nest site.

The island was a typical seabird city insofar as each species had its special nesting zone. Many of the **Black Noddies** were breeding within a few metres above the sea. The **Red-footed** and **Brown Boobies** were on ledges, the **White-tailed Tropic Birds** were located inside clefts and on top, high above us, were the **Frigate Birds** and **Masked Boobies**. The **Fairy Terns** were scattered around the rock face and somewhere, **Brown Noddies** had carved out their niche Although noted, I was not aware of them.

**Above: Black Noddies** on their nests at eye-level.

**Above:** A cosy couple of **Black Noddies** as yet to build a rudimentary nest on the ledge?

My Zodiac spent some time on the edge of a small bay where there was a swirl of water which seemed to collect feathers and perhaps the odd piece of flotsam. Here, both **noddies** and **Red-footed Boobies** were continually making passes and occasional stooping to pick up pieces of flotsam to add to their nests – not that these birds build substantial structures anyway. This was a good place to have a close look at the two colour phases of the **Red-footed Booby**.

**Above:** The undersides of the pale and dark phases of the **Red-footed Booby**. They are genetically determined and are not interchangeable. It is an example of ***balanced polymorphism*** whereby the advantages and disadvantages of each are such that both colour varieties are equally favoured by natural selection. So both persist.

**Right:** A very smart brown phase bird but with a dark tail, not the more usual pale one.

**Left:** The underside of an adult **Brown Booby** for comparison.

**Above:** Two photos by **Lydia Artiola** showing a **Red-footed Booby** picking up a large feather – probably from a **Frigate Bird** and taking it up to its nest site.

**Left:** Another two nests perched on a 'stalactite' encrusted ledges. The neighbours look a little tense and were frequently displaying at each other and to other **boobies** that flew past.

**Right:** A **Black Noddy** with an oversized feather. 20,000 pairs nest on **Ascension** – 14% of the world population.

**Right:** Several **Brown Boobies** were resting at eye level, here with a **Black Noddy**. They have to my mind a strangely reptilian look about their facial region, set off by the sickly yellow and pink bill. The bare skin around the eye is blue. The majority of this species seemed to be sitting with the **Frigates** at the top of the island.

**Left:** A close up of a **Brown Booby.** We eventually saw these birds nesting in the **Cape Verde Island** of **Razo**.

**Below:** A **White-tailed Tropic Bird.** The **Red-billed** one was present as well.

**Above:** Avian pirates of the tropical seas - **Frigate Birds** sitting around the top of the island. Actually, they take a lot of flying fish as well with those long hooked bills. Although given specific status, the males are difficult to tell apart from **Magnificent Frigates**.

**Left:** The arch. The swell was so boisterous that none of us dared take our Zodiacs through it.

**Below:** Our splendid visit over, ***Plancius*** sailed along the arid coast towards **Georgetown** where we were based for the next day and a half.

**Left:** The last glimmer of day with a few of **Ascension Islands** 47 volcanic cones silhouetted against the sky.

After dinner, we went ashore to visit the **Green Turtle** nesting beach to find a female in the act of laying her eggs. Guides from the island accompanied the party and while one of them went off to find one depositing eggs, using a dull, red light torch, we were given a talk about the **Ascension Island's turtles**. It has the largest population in the **Atlantic** with may be 10-15,000 turtles using the island's beaches for breeding. Up to 300 arrive each night during the peak laying period. The adults spend most of the time over the continental shelf off **Brazil** and commute to Ascension to nest and mate – a journey which takes approximately 6 weeks. After laying six or so clutches, the females make their way back across the ocean, again taking about 6 weeks. Once a major source of food for mariners, the **Green Turtles** here were reduced to dangerously low levels but since the last World War, they have been protected and the population has flourished. Eventually, laying females were found, and we were led to see them in small groups. No flash photography was allowed.

At 06.00 hours the following morning, most of us returned to watch the last turtles return to the sea. When we arrived, a female was already hauling herself laboriously across the sand to the breakers (**see above**).

**Above:** A second female just leaving her deep nest scrape. **Right: Tank tracks** – the beach was criss-crossed by them, showing that many turtles had visited the beach during the night.

As it became lighter, photography became a little easier! On the **left,** some of ***Plancius's*** passengers snapping away.

**Below:** Nearly there! Wonderful swimmers they may be, but moving on the land is a great effort.

**Frigate Birds** were soon patrolling the beach looking for hatchlings. Although they do take a toll of them, they make no serious inroads into the turtle population. On the other hand, there is probably massive mortality of young turtles in their first year at sea. The turtle conservation people patrol the beaches, wiping out the tracks so that they can keep a count on how many females emerge from the sea at night. A couple young girls – showed us a hatchling that they had found before releasing it into the sea **(right**).

**Left**: The top of the beach bulldozed by turtles.

After breakfast on the ship, an island tour was scheduled, including a first stop at the **Sooty Tern** colony beyond the large US base at **Wideawake Airfield**. This has a runway which was capable of taking NASA'a Space Shuttle. Strategically, the island is still important as it provides a base from which the **Falkland Islands** can be reached from the **UK**. Indeed, **Ascension** was manned by militia from the time when **Napoleon** was taken to **St. Helena**; quite simply, it acted as a deterrent to any foreign rescue attempt. Similarly, **Tristan da Cunha** was a naval base at that time for the same reason. The photo **above left** is a view over the airfield with the usual cinder cones dominating an otherwise arid landscape.


**Left:** The approach to the **Sooty Tern** nesting area was parched and very hot. The path wound around a comparatively fresh larva flow of jumbled basalt **(below**).

Soon, the '*wideawake*' calls of these neat tropical terns could be heard, and the colony came into view, located on a stony plain that ran down to the distant sea.

**Above: The Sooty Tern** – or **Wideawake** - colony.

These terns have an odd nesting cycle of about nine and a half months and so the birds are occasionally not here at all at this time of the year. However, we were lucky because they had just arrived but had not yet started to nest.

Sooty black their upper parts may be, but just as much of their plumage is sparkling white. Most of my photographs of the birds in flight showed that they had not completed moulting. The secondary wing feathers on the bird on the **left** are very ragged whereas the outer pinions or primaries are perfect. I also thought that the streamers were rather shorter than I had expected. Perhaps they had not completed growing. The birds were not aggressive in the manner of many species of nesting terns – another reason for thinking that there were no eggs.

**Right:** The **Sooties** beat past us into the stiff breeze almost at head level giving us first class views of them.

While we were watching, the birds sitting on the ground performed a 'dread'. Suddenly all of them took to the air, and the sky was filled with calling terns for a minute or more, before they returned and once again settled. Terns and gulls are known to do this, sometimes for no apparent reason.

**Left:** Suddenly, the sky was filled with alarmed **Sooty Terns**. So far as could be ascertained, there was no reason for the panic.

After the nesting season, **Sooty Terns** vanish out to sea. It is a pan-tropical species, which, up until today, I have only ever had a few distant glimpses of them. One more surprise remained – namely a pair of nesting **Brown Noddies** by the path.

**Above:** The pair of **Brown Noddies** with a chick nestling in the shade under its parent.

**Right:** This brooding **Brown Noddy** is panting, as well it might because the heat thrown off by the dark volcanic rock was intense.

Without a doubt, had not the **feral cats** been exterminated, this pair of **noddies** would not have been successfully nesting on the main island. Also, the success rate of the **Sooty Terns** has increased as a result of the campaign.

All too soon, we headed back to the vehicles to continue our island tour. Most of the plants are introduced – one particularly rampant one, by the BBC when they ran a relay station. With so little rain and porous soil, the island resembles a scrubby desert except on **Green Mountain,** which, at 2817 ft (861 metres) is high enough to make cloud and generate a little rain. **Charles Darwin** visited the island on the ***Beagle*** and suggested to his friend **Joseph Hooker** at the **Royal Botanical Gardens**, that suitable plants should be established here. Apparently, some remain near the summit. However, we could not drive to the peak because heavy rainfall had recently washed away part of the road.

**Above:** This is as near as we could get to the cloud shrouded peak.

**Left:** Our driver took us to a lookout within a few hundred feet of the top of **Green Mountain** where it was certainly fresher. The view towards the coast was well worth the ride.

The island, like so many tropical oceanic ones has a good population of **Land Crabs**. However, unlike many of the others, **Ascension** still has them. These have to migrate down to the sea to breed, and in some years, they apparently overwhelm the place, entering houses in their quest to reach the shore. One was found crouched in its burrow **(right**).

**Above:** Colour! ***Hibiscus*** and another flower that I should know flowering on **Green Mountain**.

Zodiacs ferried us back to the ***Plancius*** at the end of the afternoon. **Sally Lightfoot Crabs** scurried around the rocks by the jetty - see right – and shoals of **Black Triggers** clustered around it. At night, their place was taken by long, slim **Garfish** which scattered in panic when a predatory **Trevally** zoomed through them.

**Right: Black Triggers** in the tepid sea around the jetty.

The small-time fishermen I saw landed a nice catch of groupers – some, I thought, far too small to eat and should have been thrown back.

But a sport fisherman had speared a fine **Dolphin Fish** and, after filleting it, hurled the backbone into the sea and this caused a feeding frenzy among hundreds of **Black Triggers (left**).

***Plancius*** slipped her anchor just after 17.00 hrs and we sailed northwards, bound for **Cape Verde Islands,** with skeins of **Masked Boobies** heading back towards **Boatswain Island** passing in front of the bow. There was a glorious sunset.

**Above:** A last look at **Ascension Island**, its central volcanic peak and numerous cinder cones at 7° 54' S. Being a geologically young island on the American side of the mid-Atlantic Ridge, the possibility of further eruptions cannot be rule out.

The following morning, **26th April** saw very different weather as we headed into the region of equatorial heating, low pressure and big clouds bearing rain. I recorded that the temperature was 28°C with 78% humidity. Pressure was 1008 Mbs, and a 20 knot wind. There was a heavy downpour during lunch.

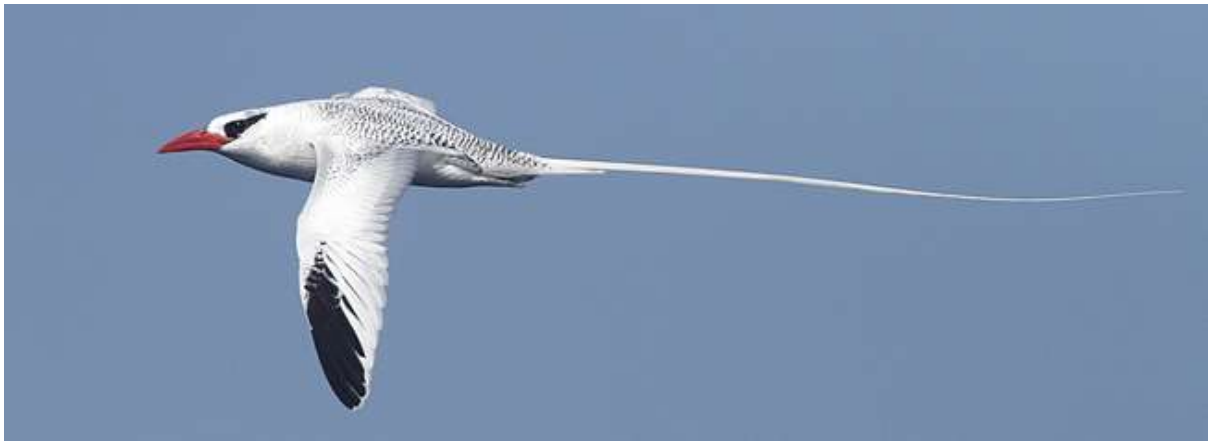
On the **27th,** we were certainly in the *Doldrums*, stifling hot and mirror calm seas (**see below**).

We crossed 'the line' at about 15.30 and many felt obliged to ingratiate themselves before **King Neptune** to obtain his permission to cross into the northern hemisphere. I noted that many beaked whales were seen, **Sperm Whales** and what appeared to be a **House Martin** fluttered around the ship and eventually landed.

**Above**: A lovely sunset on the **27th April** just a few miles north of the **Equator** in **mid-Atlantic**.

**Above:** A scene fit for *Dante's Inferno*? Dramatic clouds at dawn on the **28th April**. It was overcast all day and there was a thunderstorm in the evening with the decks out of bounds. I noted that **Arctic Terns, Leach's Storm Petrel, Bulwer's Petrel** and both **Arctic** and **Long-tailed Skuas** were spotted.

I recorded nothing on the **29th** but during the afternoon before our arrival in the **Cape Verde Islands**, a couple of **Red-billed Tropic Birds** turned up, followed us and the adult made repeated attempts to land by the Zodiacs on the upper rear deck. They kept with us for the best part of an hour. It was a marvellous opportunity to study this fast and high flying seabird. I suspect that the adult was accompanied by its short-tailed and yellow-billed fledgling. It was considerably less confident about approaching the ship.



**Above:** Studies of the adult and the fledgling.

**Right:** This species has amazingly thin wings. They are not particularly long like an albatross's wing which is designed for high speed gliding. **Tropic Birds** are flappers but fly at speed and their 'light-weight' wings must be adapted for rapid up and down movements. Low drag and inertia but high thrust?

**Left:** The fine markings on the upper parts – seen as this bird enters the ship's shadow.

**Right:** One of the Dutch birders tries to attract the adult with a rather dried up piece of fish which it justifiably ignored. A few pairs of this species nest in the **Cape Verde Islands** which must be their most northerly outpost on this side of **the Atlantic**.

**Above:** On May Day, ***Plancius*** reached **Praia, Santiago** in the **Cape Verde Islands**.

Thus concluded a voyage that started in **Ushuaia** at 54° 45'S, 68° 50W, proceeded down to the **Antarctic Sound** at 62° 49S and then turned north to **Praia** at 14° 54'N, 23° 30'W, a voyage of **7111 nautical miles**. We spent a couple of days in these islands, one on **Fogo** allowing one to appreciate **Charles Darwin's** comment that *'the islands would generally be considered uninteresting, but to anyone accustomed only to an English landscape, the novel aspect of an utterly sterile land possesses a grandeur which vegetation might spoil*'. At last, the native fauna and flora has a Euro-African flavour but what we saw must await a separate account.

One old friend and a new one! **Brown Boobies** are still with us but we now have the endemic **Cape Verde Shearwater**.