

Birds of a feather. Blue-footed boobies, here in the Galápagos, are seabirds closely related to gannets.



Flight of fancy

The Galápagos archipelago is home to three species of booby, and nature lovers flock here to see them in all their glory.

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Global travellers.

Though they are a large bird at about 70cm in height, red-foots (right) are the smallest member of the group. They are widespread in the tropics, and may number more than one million worldwide. Volcanic craters on islands such as Isabela (centre) are evidence of the geologic activity in the area.



IS THERE ANY BIRD more entrancing than a booby? The sideways glance, the slightly brazen swagger, the twinkle in their eyes that suggests they find you as amusing as you find them...which seems reasonable given their name. “Booby” is said to come from the Spanish term bobo, which means “fool” or “clown”. They may have been thus named because boobies are ungainly on land, as seabirds often are.

They were also thought foolish for their fearlessness of humans – a problem that drove many species toward extinction as they made easy picking for passing mariners. Sailors at sea found boobies landing aboard ships easy to catch and a ready meal.

There are seven booby species worldwide. The three found in the Galápagos archipelago – the red-footed, Nazca and blue-footed – pointedly demonstrate that not all boobies are created equal. Red-footed boobies, the only one of the Galápagos trio that nests in trees, are friendly but rather aloof. They eye you off from a distance, but don’t engage. If you invited them over, they’d probably politely refuse.

Nazcas are the snooty ones; the kind of guest who’d need an outdoor



Ocean wanderer. The blue-foot is found along the Pacific coast of the Americas from Mexico and Panama to Peru and the Galápagos.

sun lounge to sit on, proper cutlery and the correct wine glass. Blue-foots, however, would be gathered round the barbecue, paper cups in hand, teasing each other in raucous chorus: the first to poke fun at themselves and the last to leave. This, perhaps, explains our fondness for them.

The Galápagos’ most endearing bird is known for its strutting-and-

blue-foot-waving mating ritual. And its spectacular plunge-diving for food, which can see them spear into the water at speeds approaching 100km/h.

David ‘Dave’ Anderson, Professor of Biology at Wake Forest University, in North Carolina, USA, has a soft spot for blue-foots, and right now he’s concerned about their long-term welfare. Dave’s study of the reproductive life history of Nazcas on Española Island has been running for three decades; he’s banded 17,000 individuals over that period.



Babe magnet. Darwin referred to the magnificent frigatebird as the “condor of the ocean”. During the breeding season, males (above) inflate bright red ‘gular sacs’ to attract females.



Close-up time. Visitors to the Galápagos (above) with the AG Society can expect to have remarkable opportunities to experience wildlife, such as these young blue-footed boobies, first hand. Nazca boobies (left) are the least showy looking of the three species found here.

“It’s a very tractable system,” Dave says of working in the Galápagos. “The birds have no fear of humans and they handle attention easily.”

Over the years, he’s studied them in parallel with Nazcas on Española. “And then in the mid-1990s, we noticed that they’d stopped breeding, and we hardly see blue-foots on Española now,” he says. “That was really the first indication that a problem might exist.”

Other long-term Galápagos researchers remarked that they’d ▶



