



# LADY ELLIOT ISLAND Birds



# FACT SHEET

## LADY ELLIOT ISLAND

# Birds

The Great Barrier Reef (GBR) boasts a total of 215 bird species which can be divided into three groups: seabirds, shorebirds and land birds. Birds are attracted to the GBR because of its abundance of food and isolated islands perfect for nesting and roosting. Seabirds and shorebirds in particular have a major influence on island ecosystems, especially coral cays. Their droppings, known as guano, provide a fertile soil and assist in the introduction of plants. Seeds that attach themselves to the feathers and feet of the birds are also carried to new locations.

## LEI BIRDS

From the commencement of guano mining in the 1860s until the 1970s, Lady Elliot Island (LEI) remained almost devoid of all vegetation and had minimal birds nesting on it. Since a re-vegetation program commenced in 1969, bird numbers have dramatically increased. LEI now has the second highest diversity of bird species on the Great Barrier Reef with up to 95 different species of seabirds, landbirds and shorebirds. Some are residents that breed in season and live on LEI all year round, whilst others are classified as migrants as they spend extended periods on Lady Elliot enjoying the sun and plentiful food. LEI hosts huge colonies of thousands of breeders. They visit the island solely to nest and raise their young between September and March each year.

## SEABIRDS

Seabirds spend most of their time at sea and have developed various adaptations. They derive their food directly from the ocean and have the ability to drink saltwater and excrete the excess salt out of their nasal slits. Most have webbed feet that act as paddles in the water and oiled feathers that act as waterproofing. Seabirds will generally only lay one to two eggs per season.



### **Black (White-capped) Noddy** (*Anous minutus*)

A small population of these birds call LEI home, but thousands visit each summer to breed and nest. They are the only marine terns to build large nests and one of few to nest in trees.



Australian Government  
Department of Resources,  
Energy and Tourism



### **Common Noddy**

(*Anous stolidus*)

The larger cousins of the Black Noddy, these birds prefer to nest on the ground and small shrubs at both ends of the airstrip.



### **Crested Tern** (*Sternabergii*)

In summer, hundreds of pairs of crested terns lay their eggs in the open, mostly on short grass near the weather station. Here they set up a crèche system where adults take turns guarding the chicks while the others head out to forage.

### **Bridled Tern**

(*Sterna anaethetus*)

Also known as 'dog terns' due to the yapping noise they make. These birds nest in large numbers on the Island amongst coral rubble and under shrubs. Feed on small fish near the waters surface.



### **Roseate Tern**

(*Sterna dougallii*)

These birds nest in large numbers on the Island and lay their eggs in the open amongst coral shingle above the high tide mark. They fly over the water with beaks pointing down, looking for food. They plunge straight into the water to catch fish, which are caught and swallowed headfirst.

### **Wedge-tailed Shearwater**

(*Puffinus pacificus*)

During the summer months these birds, also known as 'Mutton Birds', nest in burrows up to 2m in length. They have an interesting 'love song' that you may hear at night that sounds like a baby crying or ghostly wail.

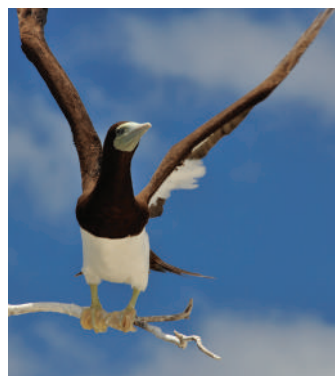




### Red-tailed Tropic Bird

(*Phaethon rubricauda*)

Several pairs of red-tailed tropic birds have been recorded nesting on LEI since the 1980s. This species is rare on the Great Barrier Reef. They only come to land to nest and are a spectacular sight with their long red tail streamers.



### Brown Booby

(*Sula leucogaster*)

These large birds are often seen roosting on the mooring barrels and boats on the western side of the island. They feed by making spectacular plunges into the sea from heights of up to 20m to catch fish and squid.



### White-bellied Sea-Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucogaster*)

Catch fish with their talons, not their beaks. Their feet have sharp spicules to help grip slippery fish. Strongly muscled legs allow them to carry fish heavier than their body weight. Mating pairs stay together for life.



### Lesser Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*)

Visit the Island but are not thought to breed or nest here. These birds are called 'pirates of the sky' as they chase and harass other seabirds to steal their food. The frigates swoop down and scare the birds into regurgitating the food. As the food falls, the frigates swoop down and grab it.

## SHOREBIRDS

The term 'shorebirds' is used to refer to a large range of different species, that spend most of their time along the shore.

Shorebirds can be divided into two categories – resident and migratory. The latter are known to travel thousands of kilometres between their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere to their feeding grounds in the southern hemisphere. Their diets mainly consist of invertebrates found in intertidal areas.



### Pied Oyster Catcher & Sooty Oyster Catcher

(*Haematopus longirostris* & *Haematopus fuliginosus*)

These shorebirds are very distinctive with very long, straight red beaks. They use these beaks to probe the sand and mud for shells. They break shells by either hammering them or prying the shells open with their beaks. These birds mate for life and are always seen with their partner.



### Eastern Reef Egret

(*Egretta sacra*)

Although the white and grey morphs of these birds look different, they are the same species. These birds are ambush hunters, able to stand still at the water's edge for long periods of time waiting in one place for prey (crabs, fish and squid) to emerge from their hideouts. They use their beaks to stab the prey, then they toss the food into the air and swallow it.

### Ruddy Turnstone

(*Arenaria interpres*)

These small shorebirds migrate every year between the Arctic Circle and the Great Barrier Reef (many thousands of kilometres). Their name comes from their habit of using their beaks to flip over rocks and shells as they look for worms, sand fleas, and small crabs to eat.





### Pacific Golden Plover

(*Pluvialis fulva*)

Another species that migrates long distances, these birds arrive on LEI in August after breeding in northern Siberia. Their diet consists of molluscs, crustaceans and other invertebrates. This species displays a distinctive start-stop feeding action.

### Bar-tailed Godwit

(*Limosa lapponica*)

Identified by their long, slightly upturned bill which they use to probe the sand for food. These birds are known to make the longest non-stop migration, travelling from New Zealand to China (over 1,000km) in just nine days.



## LANDBIRDS

Land birds of the GBR are typically found on continental islands, however, coral cays have become home to select few land bird species. These birds do not feed from the sea but rather make use of food available from the land. Land birds tend to produce more young than sea birds and can lay up to eight eggs per clutch.



### Buff-banded rail

(*Gallirallus philippensis*): These birds dwell and nest on the ground and very rarely fly. Adults are well camouflaged, but chicks are small black balls of fluff. They are scavengers and will readily steal any unattended food.

## DID YOU KNOW?

The name *Noddy* is derived from their characteristic nodding behaviour seen during breeding displays.



### Capricorn Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis chlorocephalus*)

Small energetic birds with a distinct white ring around their eye. Commonly seen on the resort side of the Island. They feed on a variety of invertebrates and fruit.

## THREATS TO SEABIRDS

- Natural disasters - Cays are unprotected from wind and weather. Nests can be destroyed during storms and foraging opportunities limited resulting in starvation.
- Human disturbance - Birds are likely to flee when humans are present, leaving their nests and chicks unattended.
- Fishing - Food sources can be depleted and risk of entanglement in fishing nets.
- Pollution - Birds are also affected by oil spills or ingestion of rubbish.
- Reduction in native vegetation and habitat due to construction.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP PROTECT BIRDS

- Never try to touch birds, chicks or eggs.
- Reduce noise and movement to avoid disturbing nesting and roosting birds
- Watch your step to avoid crushing camouflaged eggs and chicks
- If birds exhibit stressful behaviour (for example, dive bombing) back away and leave the area
- Support seabird rescue organisations

### Acknowledgements

Content: Maggie McNeil, Neville Coleman, Courtney Adamson

Images: Courtney Adamson, Penny Smith, Jim Buck, Lyndal O'Gorman

This is an Australian Government co-funded initiative under T-QUAL Grants