

With an average annual water temperature of 75 F (24 C.) and underwater visibility of up to 131 feet (40 meters), diving has become Fernando de Noronha's primary tourist attraction. The archipelago boasts white sandy beaches lapped by waters untainted by silt from Brazilian rivers. There are 230 species of fish and 15 varieties of coral in the archipelago. Dolphins, stingrays, whales, five types of sharks and two species of marine tortoise all inhabit the archipelago.

Twenty-four species of marine birds are also to be found. I was captivated by the scores of masked boobies (*Sula dactylatra*) which followed the Silver Shadow on March 13 as the ship circumnavigated and then sailed away from Fernando de Noronha.

The family Sulidae contains nine species of boobies and gannets. Both boobies and gannets are conspicuous at sea due to their large size, high flight and spectacular diving habits. Both boobies and gannets have long pointed bills, webbed feet and pointed wings. Although resembling a gannet superficially, the masked booby's head is completely white and the coloration resembles a black face mask. In addition, the masked booby is broader than the gannet, and there is a more extensive trailing edge to the wings of the former.

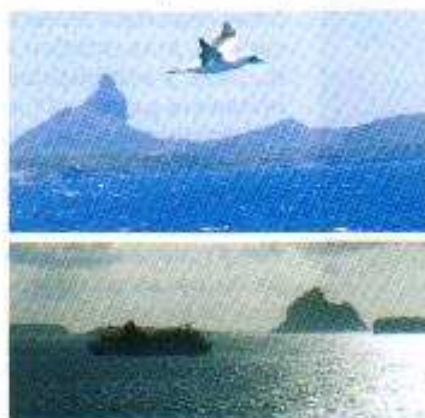
Early mariners, who found that boobies exhibited no fear of humans, killed them easily for food. Because these birds appeared tame, they were called boobies after the Spanish word *bobo* which means 'stupid.'

With a length of 34 inches (86 cm) and a width of 60 inches (152 cm), the masked booby is the largest and heaviest of the boobies. According to the National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region by John Bull and John Forand, Jr., published in New York in 1994 by Alfred A. Knopf, the masked booby is "a stocky white seabird with a black tail, black tips and trailing edges to the wings." It bears a pinkish or orange bill, and during the breeding season the booby exhibits a patch of bare, bluish skin at the base of the bill.

Preferring deep water for fishing, the booby executes near-vertical plunge-dives in search of flying fish and/or squid. In fact, boobies are seldom found in regions where flying fish and squid are not plentiful. I found that a booby would often let out a squawk similar to that of a duck prior to plunging deep into the Atlantic as if it were a vertical torpedo. Other boobies, upon hearing the squawking, would plunge into the ocean nearby. Peter Harrison in *Seabirds of the World A Photographic Guide*, published in London in 1996 by Christopher Helm Ltd., mentions that the masked booby, which is pan-tropical, is a

colonial breeder on islands, including the south Atlantic islands of Fernando de Noronha and Ascension Island where it normally lays two chalky, pale blue eggs in a shallow depression.

The Field Guide to the Birds of North America, third edition, published in Washington, DC in 1999 by the National Geographic Society, points out that the masked booby breeds as far north as Florida's Dry Tortugas. This booby is also sighted rarely in the Gulf Stream as far north as the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The bird is seen only occasionally in the Gulf of



Mexico during the summer. The masked booby is loosely gregarious at sea but is said not to follow ships usually. In fact, the many masked boobies which accompanied us on March 13 were no longer in evidence the following day.

At 9 a.m. on March 14 the Silver Shadow arrived one mile (1.6 km) off St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks, which lie at latitude 0.93 N. and longitude 29.35 W., more than 496 miles (800 km) off the coast of Brazil. These equatorial Brazilian islands, composed of mylonitic peridotite, are of volcanic origin. The island group, some 820 feet (250 meters) wide and with a maximum height of 64 feet (19.5 meters), is the peak of a submarine mountain which extends 13,123 feet (4,000 meters) down to the sea bed below.

St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks are of interest primarily because they are so far offshore in the equatorial Atlantic Ocean. These isolated islands represent one of the very few places where a mid-oceanic ridge attains a height which is above sea level. In effect, these mid-Atlantic rocks serve as an oasis for marine life within an otherwise deep water environment.

There is no source of fresh water on the rocks other than rain, and the islands themselves are devoid of vegetation with the exception of two types of algae. But the marine flora and fauna provide a significant food source for the seabirds which reside and breed there. A 1971 biological survey by

Smith et al.\* showed that the brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*), the brown noddie (*Anous stolidus*) and the black noddie (*Anous minutus*) all breed on these rocks and that these birds' eggs are sometimes eaten by crabs (*Grapsus grapsus*), which occur there in large numbers. Incidentally, all three of these birds are also said to breed on Ascension Island.

While it appears that scientists, amateur radio enthusiasts and Brazilian military personnel may have been the only visitors to St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks in recent years, interestingly, these isolated islands were also visited by Charles Darwin in HMS Beagle in 1860 and by H. N. Moseley in HMS Challenger in 1879. Both naturalists reported seeing vast numbers of sea birds during those nineteenth century calls. However, multitudes of sea birds are no longer in evidence today. This may be due to human interference on the islands. A lighthouse, a radio tower, a house and a shed have been constructed on one of the islands. There is also a wooden stairway running down to a small dock area.

The decline in bird life may also be due to extensive fishing in the area by boats from Brazil. During my short visit I spotted three fishing boats working off these rocks. Captain Chiese of the Silver Shadow remarked that he was surprised to see such small fishing boats operating so far from the continent of South America.

\* Additional internet reference used in preparation of this article:

[www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/nt/nt1318\\_full.html](http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/nt/nt1318_full.html)

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