

# Ascension Conservation Quarterly

Issue No: 01/02  
Date: September 2002

## Conservation on Ascension: breaking new boundaries.

2002 is the start of an exciting period in the development of Conservation on Ascension. The trail of visiting scientists, their studies and recommendations, has eventually led to the Seabird Restoration Project, and the first formal, long term conservation programme on Ascension.

The list of events shows just how much has been happening over the first 6 months of the project.

## 2002 Conservation Highlights

*(see inside for details)*

- WMIL arrive from New Zealand
- Launch of Adopt-a-Beach initiative
- Ascension Explorers club starts
- Sooty tern deaths dramatically decreased
- Boobies start nesting attempts on Mainland
- Opening of Conservation Centre
- Endemic plant monitoring starts
- Trials for plant relocations in place
- Marine Biologist visits for 6 weeks
- Turtle numbers up on the last 4 years
- Launch of the St. Helena National Trust
- Visiting geologist gives invaluable insights
- Wildlife Tours
- Conservation Group created
- New items for sale
- Turtle Biologists continue vital fieldwork
- Beaked whale washed up on North East
- Seabird Restoration Project

# Beach Clean-Up

Taff Griffiths

*On Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> July, a Beach Clean up launched a year long Adopt-a-Beach Scheme. The event was well attended, and the willingness of individuals, companies and groups to adopt a beach was very encouraging. Here are some thoughts from one of the volunteers...*

Here I was sitting at my desk, feet up drinking a cup of coffee minding my own business when I received a phone telling me that I have been volunteered from a cast of thousands to organise a Beach Clean up on Turtleshell. Who could I con, oops sorry, persuade to help me out on this job? I mulled over the idea for a few hours and I decided to play on people consciences ploy.

I sent out a flyers asking for volunteers for this worthy cause, in the mean time I went down to Turtleshell to see how big the job will be. Well you have heard the old joke

“a can for every Turtle hole”, I can now confirm that joke is true. I thought to myself, either the Turtles are alcoholics or we as people have neglected our environment. I know which one I would place my money on!

The day of the clean up dawned, eight people turned up and we soon cracked on with the clean up. It us two hours to clean up the beach. I was totally GOBSMACKED with the amount of rubbish, cans corrugated sheeting, glass, wood and weeds we took off the beach.

I am soon to leave this little Island paradise and I hope that I have left it in a better condition than I found it. I hope for the future, people will have a little more thought when disposing their rubbish. I wish to extend my thanks to all those people who helped on the day for giving up their own time for this worthy cause.

**If you would like to adopt-a-beach or help monitor a beach that is already adopted, call the Conservation Office**

# Experience Ascension

B.L.Peterson

Have you experienced Ascension? If not, the conservation team runs tours to various parts of the island on the last Sunday of every month. It is really nice to get out and see what's special about Ascension. On one tour we experienced the birds of Ascension at the famous Boatswainbird Island where most of the island's birds now nest. There we saw the Ascension Frigatebird, Fairy Terns and the Masked Booby. Some of the birds hovered within a few feet of us while we took their pictures. I'm sure they were as curious about us as we were about them.

The *Procauis Ascensionis* and the *Typhlatya Rogersi* - two species of

endemic shrimp, are another of the interesting features Ascension has to offer. These shrimp will not be found any place else on the earth. We trekked to Shelly Beach to find these interesting little crustaceans living in beautiful coral pools that were abundant with life.

There have been other tours that focused on the caves, geological features, and one of the most rewarding for me, the beach clean up project.

Next time there is a conservation tour, get out and join the group. You'll be glad you did.

**Conservation Group activities are held on the last Sunday morning of every month. All are welcome.**

# Cat eradication project.

*Mike Bell*

Cats were first brought to Ascension in 1815 in the hope that they would control an increasing rat population. From the few original pets a feral population rapidly spread over the entire island, wreaking havoc amongst the once huge seabird colonies of the island. There is little doubt that feral cat predation was the primary reason for the elimination of most the seabirds from mainland Ascension.

In February 2002, a feral cat eradication programme was started which aims to shift the balance of survival back to the islands original inhabitants; the seabirds. The project, funded by the Foreign Commonwealth Office with field-work by Wildlife Management International (New Zealand) is at its mid way point.

The feral cat population on Ascension has been significantly reduced by use of a combination of trapping and poisoning. Cage traps are set within and around settlements, whereas in unpopulated areas poisoned baits are laid. A poisoning exclusion zone is extended around settlements in an attempt to reduce accidental poisoning of pet cats.

Early results are very encouraging. In over 23,000 trap-nights sixty-eight feral cats have been removed around the settlements. With an additional 400-450 cats having been poisoned from outside of these areas. Some seabird species are already beginning to return to the mainland, with Masked and Brown Boobies being recorded breeding at several different locations.

It is hoped that the removal of feral cats from Ascension will allow the seabirds to re-colonise their old haunts, allowing them to increase their depleted numbers. This would return Ascension to its former glory as the principle seabird-breeding island of the tropical Atlantic.

# Turtle Project

*Angela*

For eight months each year Ascension Island hosts the second largest green turtle *Chelonia mydas* population in the Atlantic. During November of each year both the male and female of the species begin arriving in Ascension's waters. Mating pairs can be seen offshore for the next 3 to 4 months. Nesting occurs approximately 1 month after mating and continues until July, peaking in March. Each season a female will lay several clutches of between 80 and 150 eggs at intervals of 10 to 16 days.

Once breeding is complete the adult green turtles migrate back to their foraging grounds off the coast of Brazil, a journey lasting about 6 weeks. Females return to Ascension every 3 to 4 years, generally to the same beach on which they nested in previous years.

Until 1998, when the Ascension Island Turtle Project was established, no fully comprehensive population survey had been conducted for 20 years - although monitoring during the past 4 years has indicated that the population has remained stable. The Ascension Island Turtle Group regularly

monitors the Island's beaches for turtle activities and promotes turtle conservation.

Results of studies conducted on these green turtles will be published in future issues.

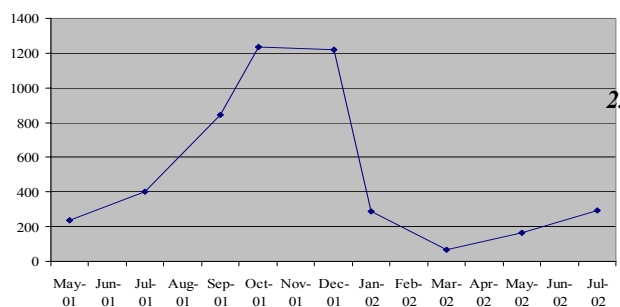
# Ascension Frigatebird

Richard White

For most people, the guano covered Boatswainbird Island is only seen when arriving at or departing from Ascension on the RMS *St Helena*. For more energetic types it is a distant view from Louie's Ledge or Hummock Point. For a few, closer views of the island can be obtained after a long boat trip around the north coast. For the Conservation Officers, visits to Boatswainbird Island are a regular part of the seabird monitoring programme that was initiated by the Seabird Restoration Programme.

Approaching from a small boat, the one hundred metre cliffs of Boatswainbird tower overhead, while thousands of seabirds soar above the island and an inquisitive few investigate the approaching boat. After a bit of skilful boat handling, landing is a short scramble up a ladder fixed onto a recently constructed gantry. From the landing, we clip onto fixed ropes for the scramble to the summit.

The main aim of the monitoring work on BBI is to assess the size of the Ascension frigatebird population. BBI is the only place in the world where Ascension frigatebirds nest. So, by counting at this one site, we can census the world population..



**Figure 1** Ascension frigatebird total egg counts, May 2001 to July 2002. Numbers increased from 238 eggs at the start of the survey in May 2001 to a peak of 1,235 eggs in October 2001 and then dropped to a low of 65 eggs in March 2002. A minimum total of 4,287 frigatebird eggs was laid in 2001/02. While frigatebirds only lay a single egg, this does not mean there were 4,287 females present, as some females made repeated nesting attempts after early failures. After March 2002 the

number of eggs then began increasing again, although numbers in 2002/03 were about 30% lower than in the same month the previous season.

Counts began in May 2001 and will continue until December 2002. Frigatebirds breed all year round but show a distinct peak in October-December. Therefore, the survey will cover two breeding seasons in order to assess the variation in frigatebird numbers between seasons

## International Links.....

### USAF

The USAF Base on Ascension has an environmental team who advise on relevant issues. An outline of their goals is given below

The issues of concern and goals at Ascension relating to natural, cultural, and historic subjects are:

#### 1. **Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species;**

##### Sea Turtles

Actions that will result in an immediate positive impact on the survival of these species are:

- Light management program (*Minimize sea turtle hatchling disorientation*)
- Delineation and protection of nesting habitat (*Minimize disturbance*)
- Ecosystem management (*Control of feral cats*)

#### 2. **Protection of Natural Habitat**

- Land use, consolidation
- Minimize the proliferation of widely scattered facilities.
- Complete a Base Comprehensive Plan.
- Return land to its natural state. Demolish abandoned-in-place structures.
- Establish a consolidated landfill with the host nation.
- Do not construct artificial reefs.

#### 3. **Control of pollutants**

- Construct secondary containment systems.
- Establish adequate refuse disposal systems.
- Construct air emissions control devices.

**4. Protection of Cultural and Historical Areas**

- Monitoring and control of potentially damaging recreational activities.
- Curation of artifacts.
- Restoration where feasible.

## **UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum**

*Frances Marks*

The aim of Forum is to promote and coordinated the conservation of natural habitats, threatened plant and animal species of the UK Overseas Territories by providing assistance in the form of expertise, information and liaison between non-governmental organisations and governments both in the UK and the

UKOTs themselves, such as via its website and database.

One way the Forum helps to raise the profile of UKOTs both in the UK and Overseas is by way of its newsletter *Forum News*. This is an avenue for the exchange of information. For example, the Ascension Island Seabird Restoration Programme, coordinated by RSPB, a member organisation of the Forum was announced in issue 20, available also in PDF format on the Forum's website. [www.ukotcf.org](http://www.ukotcf.org)

Another way of correcting the lack of understanding regarding the important biodiversity of UKOTs and the UK's share of responsible, the Forum has prepared a series of display boards,(Ascension Board illustrated) which have been widely used at various venues and formed part of the celebration during the Queen's jubilee at the Foreign and Commonwealth Overseas Territories open day on 2 July 2002.

**Ascension Conservation Quarterly**

**Issue Dates:**

March

June

September

December