



COMMONWEALTH of the
NORTHERN MARIANAS ISLANDS

- Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas)
- Maug
- Asuncion
- Agrihan
- Pagan
- Alamagan
- Guguan
- Sarigan
- Anatahan
- Farallon de Medinilla
- Saipan
- Tinian
- Aguiguan
- Rota

* Distribution in the CNMI



PHOTOS BY PETER L. TOURETTE and SCOTT VOGT



RESIDENT SEABIRDS TROPICBIRDS of the CNMI

Fagpi *Chamorro* Su'ghu'bwesch *Carolinian*

IDENTIFICATION

White-tailed tropicbirds (*Phaethon lepturus*) are white with black markings and yellow bills. They have sharply pointed wings and two long, white feathers streaming from their tails. Red-tailed tropicbirds (*Phaethon rubicunda*) are all white with bright red beaks. Adults have two long, red tail feathers trailing behind them. The tail feathers of tropicbirds are longer than their bodies. All tropicbirds have black feathering around their eyes that may make it easier for them to catch their prey against the glare of the ocean.

HABITAT and FEEDING

Found in many tropical oceans and islands, White-tailed tropicbirds stay closer to shore while Red-tailed tropicbirds can occur hundreds of miles out to sea. Adults cruise the open ocean to feed and come ashore to nest. When they are not nesting, they will sometimes spend months at sea. Younger birds that are not of breeding age spend all of their time at sea. Very little is known about the whereabouts of juveniles. Tropicbirds hover over the water to catch flying fish, their main prey item. They can also dive from high up in the air to catch smaller fish and squid. They have bills with notches in them to help them hold their slippery prey. Fishermen follow these seabirds to help locate schools of mahi-mahi and tuna.

REPRODUCTION

During courtship, a pair will glide and circle each other high in the air. One bird will sometimes hover over its mate, gently touching its back with its long tail feathers. Tropicbirds are highly vocal during courting displays.

Tropicbirds nest in loose groups near coastal areas including forests, beaches and cliff faces. Females lay one egg in a shallow nest dug with their webbed feet. Both parents catch fish and regurgitate their food for the chick to eat.

THREATS and CONSERVATION

Commercial and recreational fisheries are threats to tropicbirds. Many seabirds are caught while trying to steal bait off long lines of hooks. Others are trapped inside of trawl nets, gillnets and by offshore trollers. Overfishing impacts seabird populations, as they must fly further from shore in search of food.

Predators and habitat alteration are other threats to tropicbirds. Rats and predatory birds feed on the eggs of tropicbirds. Nesting habitats may be altered due to mining of coral, development, pollution and/or military operations.

Tropicbirds are protected seabirds in the CNMI. The commercial fishing industry is developing methods to help reduce seabirds as bycatch (unwanted species). Efforts to keep the Brown treesnake (*Boiga irregularis*) out of the CNMI will help protect these birds.



White-tailed tropic bird

ARTIST
DOUGLAS
PRATT

BELLY DANCERS

While very graceful in flight, tropicbirds legs are so short they can hardly walk on land. They have to crawl on their bellies to get around.

FACTOID!



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