

# NOTES ON IMPACT OF HUMAN VISITATION TO HOUTMAN ABROLHOS SEABIRD BREEDING COLONIES

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Seabirds that breed in colonies can suffer significant detrimental impact from inappropriate human access, unless it is properly controlled or rules are followed by visitors. Conversely, human visitation can have little or no impact under some conditions and be a valuable experience for visitors.

Many species can tolerate brief (not more than than one minute - the 1 minute rule) visitations by small groups of people to nesting sites. Long visits can lead to eggs becoming too cold or too hot, or chicks not being fed or being abandoned by their parents. When visiting a colony or walking near a colony, visitors should take care that they do not remain so close that adult birds will not return to nests. Some species are particularly susceptible to interference (see below).

Possible effects of people on seabirds breeding at the Houtman Abrolhos are:

**BURROW NESTERS: Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Little Shearwater, White-faced Storm-petrel.** The burrows of these species can be easily collapsed (with the possible death of the adult or chick, or destruction of the egg) by people walking through colonies. These species fly in the area of the colony only at night and can be attracted to strong lights (there are a few deaths every year of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters at the Pelsaert Island lighthouse) or fly into objects they are not familiar with (eg, windmills).

The basic rule for visitors should be never to walk into areas with burrows.

**COLONIALY NESTING TERNS GROUP A (nest in open): Caspian Tern, Crested Tern, Roseate Tern, Fairy Tern.** These species are little affected by short visits to colonies when breeding is at the egg or very small chick stage; however, gulls may predate eggs or small chicks once adults fly from nest. If gull predation a possibility, the colonies should not be approached within 'lift-off' distance. Once the chicks are larger (at the runner stage) they panic easily and will run off cliff edges and into the ocean, where they may drown or be taken by predators such as gulls. Caspian Terns nest colonially only at Leo Island. Elsewhere only single nests occur. The same rules apply to single nests as to colonies.

Fairy Tern colonies are often hard to see; the eggs and chicks are well camouflaged. Their presence is often indicated by adult birds diving on visitors while calling loudly. Fairy Tern adults will often flush from nests when people approach within about 200 or even 300 metres.

The basic rule is never to approach (within 200 m) a colony with runners. Unless the party includes an experienced ornithologist who can competently judge the stage of breeding from a considerable distance, visitors should never approach within 200 m (or further if adults flush from nests) of a colony. Move quickly away once birds flush from nests if runners are sighted.

**COLONIAL TERNS GROUP B (nest in vegetation or under rock): Common Noddy, Lesser Noddy, Sooty Tern, Bridled Tern.** Adults of these species are little affected by brief visitation to the edge of colonies (within 20 m of nests). However, once visitors come close enough to cause the nesting birds to fly off the nest, eggs and small chicks will be

taken by gulls, so the closeness of approach needs careful monitoring. Retreat if birds are flushed from the nest. Obey the one minute rule at all times.

**CORMORANTS: Pied Cormorant, Little Pied Cormorant.** Cormorant colonies are VERY susceptible to interference and should never be approached within 200 m unless breeding is only at the egg and very small chick stage. The large Pied Cormorant colony at the edge of the lagoon at Wooded Island is badly affected by visitors at times. Little Pied Cormorants breed only at Wooded Island Lagoon in mangroves. The Australian Pelican (not recorded breeding at the Abrolhos, but may do so in the future) is also very susceptible to interference and colonies should NEVER be approached within 300 m at any time.

**RAPTORS: White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Osprey.** Brief visits to Sea-Eagle and Osprey nests usually have negligible impact. If eggs are present, the adults will fly off, so visits must be kept short (not more than 1 minute). If chicks are present they will usually "freeze" in a prone position, allowing close approach. However, if the chick show signs of panic visitors must move away from the nest immediately.

**GULLS: Pacific Gull, Silver Gull.** Gull colonies may usually be approached for short times. Adults will fly off nests when the approach is too close. When small chicks are present they will usually hide in vegetation or "freeze" near the nest. Again, do not stay in the area for long. Large chicks will sometimes run into the ocean (similar to Group A Terns) - if this happens visitors should immediately move away from the area.

**OYSTERCATCHERS: Pied Oystercatcher, Sooty Oystercatcher.** Oystercatchers have almost invisible nests on beaches (sand or rocks). If people note frantic adult oystercatchers, it usually denotes a nest or chick nearby. If this happens, leave the area.

**LARGE WADERS: Eastern Reef Egret.** This species builds large nests from sticks on a cliff ledge or in mangroves. It will readily flush from the nest. If this happens, visitors should move away from the area.