

# endangered

by Andrew Burbidge



## Masked booby

The masked booby has a wide distribution in tropical oceans. A subspecies of this bird, the eastern Indian Ocean masked booby (*Sula dactylatra bedouti*), breeds on islands off the Pilbara and Kimberley and is rare and listed as threatened. Perhaps only 1600 breeding adults exist, with breeding on fewer than five islands.

Masked boobies can be distinguished from the more common brown boobies by their predominantly white colour and black face. The flight feathers and tail are also black and the large bill is yellow. Off the Pilbara coast, masked boobies occasionally occur as far south as Exmouth Gulf and may be sighted in the Dampier Archipelago. The largest breeding colonies are on Bedout Island, north of the mouth of the De Grey River, and Adele Island,

north of Cape Leveque. Limited nesting occurs on West Island in the Lacepede Islands, north of Broome. Counts by Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) staff and visiting ornithologists suggest there are populations of 300 to 400 breeding pairs on Adele, 120 to 270 pairs on Bedout and less than 10 pairs on West Island. Small numbers nest on islands at Ashmore Reef, where they and their eggs are threatened by illegal hunting by Indonesian fishers.

Masked boobies, like other members of the gannet family, feed mainly on fish obtained by plunging from heights of up to 100 metres above the ocean's surface. Feeding boobies make a spectacular sight as they dive almost vertically into the sea to more than three metres below the surface, before emerging, usually with a fish.

The nest is a scrape in sand,

either at the top of the beach or in open areas between vegetation. Two eggs are usually laid. Masked boobies will vigorously defend their nest against intruders, including people.

Bedout Island, after which the subspecies is named, has several other breeding seabirds: brown boobies, least frigatebirds, crested terns, lesser crested terns and silver gulls. In the past, sooty terns and common noddies also nested there. However, predation by black rats probably caused these small terns to abandon the island. In 1981, staff from the former Department of Fisheries and Wildlife conducted the State's first rat eradication project on the 24-hectare island, and it is hoped that breeding by small seabirds will eventually recommence.

**Photo by Dave Watts/Lochman Transparencies**