

Seabirds

remote, rare and remarkable

"As a botanist, my role in the team was to study the plants, but it was impossible not to be awestruck by the birds."

Dr John Westaway,
Coral Sea Bush Blitz researcher

Photographer: Matt Guest

The Coral Sea Marine Park is lightly dotted with tiny cays. These sandy fragments of rock and coral are stepping stones in the vast Coral Sea, making them important nesting and resting places for the region's seabirds.

Did you know?



**56 cays
and inlets**

are scattered across the Coral Sea Marine Park, providing vital seabird habitat.



2341 km

is the distance travelled by a masked booby from Phillip Island (near Norfolk island), where it was banded as a chick, to North East Herald Cay.



**60,000
to 130,000**

pairs of wedge-tailed shearwaters breed on Coral Sea cays every year.



Photographer: Matt Guest



Photographer: Matt Guest



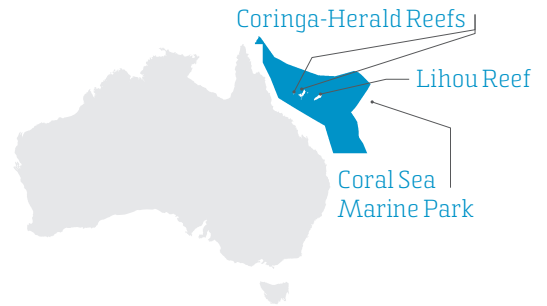
Photographer: Matt Guest

High-density nesting and feeding grounds

home to extraordinary creatures

Some cays have unique plant communities, but even the unvegetated cays host seabirds and turtles nesting in the sand.

These tiny specks of land support huge numbers of migrating and nesting seabirds. Breeding season in the Coral Sea is an unforgettable annual spectacle.



Mass breeding events

At the end of cyclone season each year, tens of thousands of seabirds descend on the Coral Sea cays to find the perfect nesting spot. Species that depend on the cays for their survival in the region include the red-footed and masked booby, greater and lesser frigatebird, red-tailed tropicbird, black noddy, bridled and black-naped tern, brown booby, wedge-tailed shearwater, crested and sooty tern, and common noddy.

The density of bird life here in breeding season is hard to imagine. The tiny North East Herald Cay, less than half a square kilometre in size, hosts over 500 pairs of red-tailed tropicbirds and more than 1400 pairs of frigatebirds.

Epic migrations

The Coral Sea cays are a vital stopover for migrating seabirds. One of the most extreme travellers is the frigatebird, which can fly for months without landing — they feed by catching flying fish or taking other birds' prey mid-flight. Cleverly saving energy by using the natural updrafts over the sea, they can fly at altitudes of up to 4000 m.

Rare birds and flowering forests

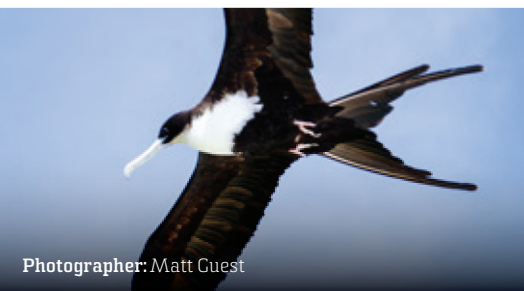
The Coringa-Herald and Lihou Reef cays provide near-pristine nesting habitat for several threatened birds. The area is recognised as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

Thick forests of *Pisonia grandis* (a flowering tree in the Bougainvillea family) grow on North East Herald Cay and South East Magdelaine Cay. Globally rare, *Pisonia* forests play an important role in supporting seabird populations by providing shelter and nesting habitat.

Journey of discovery

In June 2016, Parks Australia led a 'Bush Blitz' voyage to largely unexplored cays in the Coral Sea, including the Diamond Islets and Coringa-Herald cays, to survey vegetation and wildlife.

They found several new species — including a soft coral and spiders — and had front-row seats for the seabird breeding season. The cays teemed with bird life at all stages of development: chicks, fledglings and huge masses of adults, many of them busy building nests, sitting on eggs and feeding chicks.



Learn more

About the Coral Sea Marine Park, including its remote islands and cays:

parksaustralia.gov.au/coralsea

About Bush Blitz: bushblitz.org.au

About the Coral Sea Ramsar wetland:

environment.gov.au/wetlands

About visiting the Coral Sea: tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au

The Coral Sea Marine Park is managed by Parks Australia.



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