

# Caribbean BIRDWATCH

Expert advice to help you appreciate our region's beautiful birds. In this issue we focus on the British Virgin Islands (BVI)

## Project watch

A few years ago staff members from The National Parks Trust of the Virgin Islands, BVI's Department of Conservation and Fisheries and the Jost Van Dyke Preservation Society formed an informal group to promote BVI bird conservation. One of the results of the partnership is the newly published *Landbirds of the Virgin Islands*. This bird identification card was created to help promote an interest in BVI bird watching and has brought together numerous partners from the BVI and USVI, and the regional organisation BirdsCaribbean.



**CHECK OUT** <http://www.facebook.com/BVIBirding> where information on the cards and BVI bird conservation projects can be found, ranging from a local student's rehabilitation of an injured Osprey to an upcoming seabird tracking project



SUSAN ZALUSKI

## CARIBBEAN BIRDING TRAIL TOP 3 HOTSPOTS: BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

Made up of some 60 small islands and cays, the BVI offers opportunities to view some of the 15 species of breeding seabirds and stopover spots for migrant shorebirds. The BVI's salt ponds and mangrove areas provide refuge for migratory and resident waterfowl, wading, perching and shorebirds.

**1 ANEGADA** The only coral and limestone island in the BVI, Anegada is flanked by 18-mile Horseshoe Reef, the Caribbean's largest barrier coral reef. Seabirds abound here, and the island's sandy coastlines and salt ponds are a haven for shorebirds. Anegada's Western Salt Ponds were designated as a RAMSAR *Wetland of International Importance* in 1999, and are the site of a successful Greater Flamingo reintroduction. Viewing the impressive flock of about 200 birds has become a highlight for tourists.

**2 BEEF ISLAND/ LONG BAY SALT POND** Located near Long Bay beach, and easily accessible from both road and water (for sailors), this is one of the most productive salt ponds in the BVI, and provides refuge for resident and migratory waterfowl, wading and shorebirds, and the occasional flamingo. Beef Island has also been a place for unusual bird records, including White-crowned Pigeons,

rails, owls and small grassland birds.

**3 SANDY CAY HABITAT MANAGEMENT AREA:** Postcard picture-perfect Sandy Cay became the BVI's newest National Park in 2008, when it was donated by Laurence Rockefeller's Estate. A small nature trail winds through the 14-acre cay's interior and is filled with pigeons, doves, warblers, hummingbirds and even nesting waterfowl (White-cheeked Pintails) are found on this tiny oasis. In summer, seabirds flock to its wide, sandy beach, and Red-billed Tropicbirds have nested on the island in recent years.



Anegada's Flamingos

WALKER MANGUM

## BIRD OF THE ISSUE: MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD (*Fregata Magnificens*)

**HOW TO SPOT IT:** With their long forked "scissor-tail" and long, slender, pointed wings sharply bent at the wrist, along with their habit of floating motionless in the air, these unmistakable seabirds are a common sight along our coastlines. The only seabird species where males and females look strikingly different, males appear all black with

a long hooked bill. They have a scarlet-red throat patch that they inflate like a balloon to attract a mate during the breeding season. Females are blackish overall with a white breast. Juveniles are brownish-black with a white head and breast. **WHERE TO FIND IT:** The only seabirds without waterproofing on their wings, they spend most of their days and nights 'on the wing' over open waters and are known to climb thermals, rising to altitudes of up to about 2500 metres. Frigatebirds nest in colonies in mangroves; females lay one egg in a clump of sticks. Both parents incubate and feed the chick. Young fledglings are often still fed by the female until they are one year old. **WHAT DOES IT EAT?** Sometimes known locally as the "Man Of War" for their speed and aerial piracy, frigatebirds mainly eat fish, which they snatch from the surface of the ocean, but they also feed by attacking other seabirds, forcing them to disgorge their meals.



They eat and drink in flight, returning each evening to a roost typically in offshore mangroves and islets.

**GLOBAL THREATS:** The BVI is home to one of the Caribbean's largest frigatebird colonies. Unfortunately, due to their piratical feeding behaviour, frigatebirds often become accidentally hooked by fishermen. While reeling in the bird and removing the hook is relatively simple, many unknowingly cut the line, leaving the still-hooked bird to return to its nesting area where it winds the line throughout the colony causing damage and death to itself and possibly to other birds which nest nearby and can become tangled.

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