



# ANGUILLA NATIONAL TRUST

## Preservation For Generations

### Eco-Corner

### **Dog Island: A Seabird's (and Seabirders') Paradise**

Northwest of Anguilla, just 13 kilometres away, lies a small, low-lying, rocky island. Its 511 acres are covered mostly with dense and prickly scrub. Steep cliffs show the scars of years of pounding by waves; the wounds are menacing – jagged points and deep crevices. In stark contrast are the white sand beaches that, from afar, look as though they are being lapped by gentle waves. But looks are often deceiving. The nearshore is often subject to heavy ground seas and swells.

For a small island, its ecology is wondrous. Small ground lizards sprint across the hot, dry rocks and dusty clay-soil. Birds such as plovers and sandpipers wade in the shallow waters of the saltponds, while others that are usually found in scrub-like vegetation – flycatchers, grassquits, and banaquits – can be heard singing their melodies from somewhere between the cacti and brush. But it is the seabirds that draw the visitor's attention.

*Dog Island is ranked as one of the top three seabird breeding areas in the entire Caribbean. Its importance exceeds even Cuba – one of the biodiversity hotspots of the region.*

Eight different types of seabirds nest on this island. While eight species may not sound like much, their nesting populations are staggering. In 2003, there were 5 Red-billed tropicbird nests, 30 Masked booby nests, 1 267 Brown booby nests, 10 Least tern nests, 8 Bridled tern nests, 6 000 Sooty tern nests, and 111 Brown noddy nests. That is a total of 7 573 nests. This means that on 511 acres of land, there were at least 15 146 adult birds.

Given its location, it would be assumed that this little island would be protected (for the most part) from outside damaging activities and threats. But it is not. Rats were recently observed on the island. Rodents tend to be extremely destructive and can destroy entire bird colonies by stealing and eating eggs. They do not naturally occur on the island – they may have been brought over on driftwood or debris from Prickly Pear, from the mainland, or from some other nearby island. Since they do not have any real predators here, the potential for their population to explode is substantial.

At the same time feral (wild) goats are also found on Dog Island. Domesticated goats were brought there years ago from the mainland when livestock farming used to take place. These goats are what are left of that herd. As in most places in Anguilla, goats that roam free tend to have a strong impact on the environment because they eat almost all types of vegetation, thereby destroying important habitat that other species rely on to survive. Sometimes they eat so much that they cause almost desert-like conditions.

Marine pollution, including oil spills can also cause huge mortality rates for seabirds since oil is able to coat the birds' feathers which will cause them to lose their waterproofing. This makes it easier for water to penetrate their feathers and forces the birds to spend more energy on staying warm. It can also cover them so much so that they cannot move their wings or bodies and this would eventually lead to death by drowning or starvation. Other forms of garbage such as six-pack rings and fish nets trap birds and can also cause either injury or death.

#### About the Anguilla National Trust

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The Anguilla National Trust was established in 1993 to act as custodian of Anguilla's heritage, preserving and promoting the island's natural environment and its archaeological, historical and cultural resources for present and future generations. It is in the business of ensuring the sustainability of Anguilla's heritage. The ANT is a dynamic people-centred organisation working in collaboration with public and private sector entities to manage Anguilla's natural social and cultural heritage.

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And the threat of development is even here, on this isolated part of Anguilla. As a privately-owned offshore cay, owners have the right to sell and currently, approximately 500 acres of Dog Island is on the real estate market. Selling the island to any type of developer will only mean one thing for the seabirds – a decrease (probably dramatic) in their numbers. Habitat destruction to make way for buildings, jetties, and roads, noise, foot traffic, introduced mammals such as dogs or cats, garbage, and grey water and sewage runoff will all negatively impact this relatively pristine environment.

In early 2006, Sombrero Island (approximately 65 kilometres northwest of Anguilla) was identified as a potential protected area. Another important seabird nesting area and the only place in the world where a certain species of a black lizard is found, Sombrero Island is worthy of protected area designation. Scrub Island, Little Scrub Island, and Prickly Pear East and West are also important and key sites for Anguilla's seabird populations. But the seabirds found on Anguilla's Dog Island are something to be proud of. Few places in the region are as rich as Anguilla given its size, climate, and geography – especially in terms of its seabirds.

Conserving seabirds, other plant and animal species, and the habitat on which they all rely is important for ecological, economic, and aesthetic reasons. Birds, in particular, help to control insects, pollinate plants, and disperse seeds; they provide services that are worth hundreds of millions of dollars to agricultural and forestry industries worldwide each year. With birdwatching becoming ever more popular, birds help to support a burgeoning ecotourism industry that generates billions of dollars in revenue for countries around the world. Birds are also culturally important: the turtle dove is the national bird of Anguilla. Clearly, birds play a critical role in this world and represent healthy and dynamic ecosystems. This is not different in Anguilla.

Many of the birds that frequent Anguilla and its offshore cays are migratory – they move between countries in the Caribbean region as well as between North America, the Caribbean, and South America, with Anguilla being one of the countries that lay on this migratory route. Because the ecosystems that these birds rely on extend past political boundaries, degradation or loss of habitat necessary for breeding, nesting, or feeding in any one place or country could be disastrous for the entire population. Thus, Anguilla has a role to play in bird protection and conservation not just at the national level, but also on the international stage. It is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Ensuring that species and resources are used wisely and appropriately is critical. Taking action now to limit, and perhaps more importantly, to prevent damage and destruction before it can happen is essential. Anguilla's offshore cays are, for the most part, in excellent ecological condition. Ensuring that they remain so should be on the minds of all Anguillians.

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**Eco-Corner is a regular feature provided by the Anguilla National Trust in co-operation with The Anguillian. The Anguilla National Trust welcomes questions, comments, and suggestions. If you would like to voice your opinions and/or concerns, please contact the Trust at 497 5297 or at [axanat@anguillanet.com](mailto:axanat@anguillanet.com). Together we can make a difference. *Preservation for Generations.* **