

Tiny cameras reveal where red-footed boobies fly

Scientists are tagging island seabirds to learn how their ocean trips connect sea life and land life.



A red-footed booby with a tiny tracking tag rests on a tropical island near the ocean.

Scientists are getting a bird's-eye view of red-footed boobies, large seabirds with bright red webbed feet. According to Science News Explores, ecologists are using tiny tags and cameras. Ecologists are scientists who study living things and their homes. The tools show where these birds go over the ocean. The work helps explain how one small island connects to the wide blue sea around it.

The team worked near Nelsons Island in the Indian Ocean. The island is part of the Chagos chain, a group of tropical islands far south of India. A ship brought the scientists close, but shallow coral reefs blocked the way. So they swam in with waterproof bags. The bags held tents, food, water, and science gear. On land, thousands of seabirds filled the trees and shore. The air was noisy with calls and smelled like bird poop.

Red-footed boobies are about the size of a goose. They build nests from twigs in trees and shrubs. Chicks hatch there, covered in fluffy white down. But adult birds spend much of their day away from land. They fly beyond the **horizon** to hunt fish and squid. That faraway part of their life has been hard to study. People cannot follow a flying bird across open ocean for hours without special tools.

Scientists put small devices on the birds to collect clues. A GPS unit uses satellite signals to record where a bird travels. An accelerometer, a motion sensor, records flaps, dives, and turns. An immersion **logger** records when the bird touches water. In 2024, the team also added tiny video cameras to some birds' backs. The scientists work quickly so each bird is bothered for a short time. They keep the gear very light. Later, they collect the cameras and read the data, which means facts saved by the tools.

The tags showed that most of the Chagos boobies take daytrips to find food. That sounds simple, but it matters. A **seabird** is not only an island animal or an ocean animal. It moves between both places. Scientists want to know what these birds need to survive. They also want to learn how the birds shape the ecosystem, the living community of plants and animals around them. A tiny **camera** can turn mystery into **evidence**.

Written from reporting by Science News Explores.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. Should scientists put tracking tools on wild birds if it helps them learn how to protect the birds? Defend your answer.

2. If you could study one animal near your home or school, what would you need to learn before choosing a tool to study it?

3. Which would teach scientists more about a seabird's life: watching from the ground, GPS tracks, or tiny cameras? Explain your choice.

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G L E R S E I S D V C O
G C A W I I D E V I C E
E S C A M E R A E H E E
E E D R E O E B D O T D
C E Q A E V S I Y R O S
A G L O A E I R A I E M
R N E I B V G D E Z S L
E I C G S I N V E O N O
K H E E A C A D G N Z G
E E R G R Z L H D G C G
G E A I E L N D S R I E
E E N C L V E E N O Z R

CAMERA

DEVICE

EVIDENCE

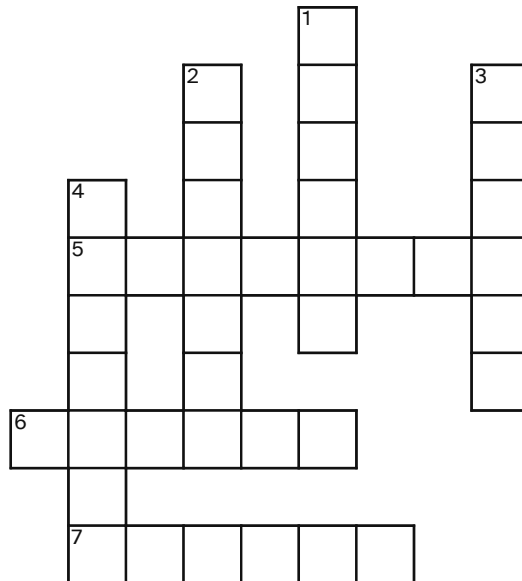
HORIZON

LOGGER

SEABIRD

SIGNAL

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ACROSS

- 5 Facts or information that help show what happened or is true
- 6 Message sent from one place to another, like from a satellite
- 7 Small piece of equipment used to gather information

DOWN

- 1 Tool that keeps track of an animal's actions or location
- 2 Distant line where sky seems to meet water or land
- 3 Small tool for taking pictures or videos of what an animal does
- 4 Feathered animal that lives near salt water and finds food far from land

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Science News Explores

“Spying on the secret lives of boobies”

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<https://www.snexplores.org/article/tagging-red-footed-boobies-seabird-lives>

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The article and its discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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