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Blue-footed boobies



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This document, dedicated to the blue-footed boobies of the Galapagos Islands, combines a series of photographs by the British researcher Godfrey Merlen, preserved as slides in the audiovisual collection of the Library, Archive & Museum of the Charles Darwin Foundation, with a selection of texts taken from William Beebe's book *Galapagos: World's End* (1924).

Using both resources, and connecting the visual works with fragments of narratives and chronicles, a comprehensive approach to one of the most iconic Galapagos species is sought. An approach that goes beyond mere scientific knowledge and that places this species in a broad and comprehensive framework. The minimalist design reinforces the importance of the images, which are already part of the audiovisual heritage of the Galapagos.

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The texts included in these pages belong to the Chapter XII, "Daphne - A crater nursery", of *Galapagos: World's End*, in which William Beebe recounts the landing of the crew of the *Noma* on the islet of Daphne Major. It is one of the first complete and popular descriptions of blue-footed boobies and their breeding habits.

Our thanks to Godfrey Merlen for the images, and to all the chroniclers, travelers and scholars who left, in their field notebooks, testimony of the natural wonders they found on their way through "The Encantadas".

Edgardo Civallero | Charles Darwin Foundation



"By walking around to the east [of Daphne Major] I found a fairly easy descent, on through the gap in the crater wall, down to the bottom. Here I found a pandemonium in the shape of six hundred, nesting, blue-footed boobies, *Sula nebouxii*, a pure culture of this species, monopolizing the entire crater..." (p. 267).



"...they [the blue-footed boobies] apparently possess this crater [of Daphne Major] throughout the year and have done so for years unknown" (p. 267).



"Eggs, and newly hatched young, and full-sized birds of two or three months were everywhere and other observers have recorded similar conditions on June and November, so there is apparently no month when the crater is deserted. Beck twenty-two and Gifford seventeen years ago found the same single species colony in this crater floor as I did today" (p. 267).



"I counted over four hundred nests, this being rather a misnomer, however, for the only nest was the small spot padded down firmly by the birds' feet. On each such spot were one or two eggs, or a corresponding number of young birds, or a sitting adult bird" (p. 268).



"The photographs show the general appearance of the birds and their home better than any detailed description. The only thing of which the photograph gives no hint is the brilliant pale ultramarine blue of the legs and great feet and webs. As we looked about at the white sand, black lava slopes, and brown and white birds, these shining blue feet dominated all other colours" (p.268).



"There were more sets of two eggs than of one, and about the same relative proportion of young birds. Much has been written about the almost invariable death of the later hatched of the two nestlings, either from starvation or from actual infanticide on the part of the parents. In this colony at least, this Spartan habit appears to be inoperative" (p. 268).



"I saw both of the parents brooding with their great webs under the eggs. When I gently pushed a female booby back from her eggs in order to photograph them, she sat protesting for a short time, and then shuffled forward and with the greatest care shoved her huge blue feet beneath the eggs" (p. 268).



"This booby ranges up and down the mainland from Lower California to Chili; and there it often lays three eggs, while two is the usual complement. The Galápagos blue-footed boobies never, so far as I know, deposit three eggs, while one is quite as commonly a complete set as two" (p. 268).



"It is interesting that while these insular birds have still retained resentment of human intrusion, so lacking in most indigenous Galápagos species, yet they have appreciably altered in number of eggs" (p. 268).



"The day-old boobies squirmed about, naked and ugly, while older birds showed a slight growth of down. This increased with age and soon became dense and long, until they appeared like powder puffs. Then, gradually, between the shoulders, brown feathers began to appear, and in the month-old birds, the juvenile plumage was about complete. The birds which were still clad in body down, but with well advanced wing feathers, were most comical" (p. 268).



"Sprouting from the snow-white down were the enormous wings and splay feet, the wings so heavy that they fairly dragged on the ground as the youngsters waddled along, appearing more like useless deformed outgrowths that *anlagen* of the wonderful pinions of the full-grown booby" (p. 268).



"Throughout all their babyhood the young birds stuck close to the hardened spot which was home. Only when their down was well on the way to disappearance did they begin to mingle with their fellows, squads of six or eight wandering about aimlessly, keeping a sharp lookout for manna in the shape of warm-storage fish from the crops of their parents, descending from the heaven of the unknown outer world" (p. 268).



"The noise, especially in the more densely occupied northeastern section, was so terrific that no conversation was possible. A blare of brazen, raucous trumpet-like notes mingled with squeaks and shrill whistlings" (p. 271).



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