

## Family life on Farquhar Atoll –The challenge of being a Sooty Tern

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When the South East trade wind starts sweeping the Seychelles beaches with strong and cold wind, Goëlettes Island (part of the Farquhar Atoll) gets ready to host its annual visitors.

Pest-free, treeless and carpeted with grass, Goëlettes is the perfect place for ground nesting seabirds such as Sooty Terns (Golet in kreol) and Brown Noddies (Makwa in kreol), which, starting from the end of April/beginning of May, gather in great numbers on the island and blacken the sky of this piece of paradise.



More than half a million seabirds return to Goëlettes once again with only one objective: find a mate and successfully rear a chick, which will carry their lineage on to the next generation of birds.

Despite the welcoming environment of Goëlettes island, rearing a chick is anything but easy for the Sooty Tern that have to face different challenges to successfully complete its breeding attempt.

The first challenge the future parents have to face is to find a good place to lay their precious egg: the grass should not be too long and the location should preferably be at the centre of the colony to avoid disturbance from predators such as crabs and herons.

Such perfect spots can be crowded and fights between neighbours are inevitable and can have unfortunate outcomes.

Once the parents have found the perfect spot, the female can lay its egg and now the couple have to alternate long days of incubation without food or water.

The incubating parent can leave the egg unattended only for very brief flights to the sea to drink some water as longer the egg stays by itself higher is the probability for it of being predated.

While one incubating parent is facing hunger and thirst, the other one goes fishing and it has to eat enough food in order to increase its body weight and be able to sustain the next incubating shift.

Ideally, it would find enough food in the least amount of time as possible to be able to relieve its partner and allow it to go fishing.

If fish is abundant and not too far from the colony, the incubation shifts may last 1 or 2 days and both parents can forage frequently.

However, if the fish is scarce and far from the colony the partner out at sea has to travel long distances to get little food and the incubation shifts can increase dramatically, reaching a duration of more than 10 days in some instances.

In some years, the food is so scarce that the incubating birds have to give up and abandon their egg.

In such cases the breeding attempt fails and they will have to try again the next year.

If the egg fails for other causes, the female can re-lay another egg but the second egg has less chance of surviving than the first one.



If the parents have been good enough in providing food for themselves and incubating the egg properly, after about 28 days, a fluffy and brownish small chick makes its way out of the eggshell into the outside world.

The proud parents now have to feed it for about 2 months until it can finally fly and learn how to catch fish by itself.

This is another challenge for the parents that live in a crowded colony like Goëlettes where everyone has a mouth to feed.

The food around the colony may be scarce after the incubation period, therefore they push themselves even further, travelling day and night to reach spots with enough fish to sustain themselves and their chick.

Such places can be up to 200km away from the colony.

The trips of foraging adults were revealed to the ICS Farquhar team thanks to the deployment of small GPS devices on 13 birds and they are astonishing.

This tracking study was made possible through funding from the GoS-UNDP-GEF Outer Islands project.



Luckily the parents are not alone in rearing their chick. When the chick is about 15 days old and able to walk around by itself the parents can leave it in a sort of kindergarten (called creche) where many chicks gather, and it will return to the nesting area in the evenings. In this way both parents can forage and bring food for their chicks. This system can decrease the risk of breeding failure during the chick rearing period.

However, periods with extreme lack of fish can prevent the adults from finding food for their chicks and this can lead to the death of many chicks in the colony. Luckily, this season has been quite good for the chicks and the majority of them, after about 2 months from hatching, have reached the juvenile stage. They are fully equipped with feathers allowing them to fly and leave the colony.

However, before reaching full independence, they have to learn how to fly and most importantly how to catch fish. Once again, the parents are there to help and tirelessly they teach their young how to practise this complicated task in the waters surrounding Goëlettes Island. This process may last about 2 more months.

This season has been particularly good for Sooty Tern's parents that managed to raise a significant number of juveniles, which are now ready to make it to the air. However, the chicks still have a lot of challenges to face before reaching adulthood, at about 4-5 years of age.

The first obstacle is the Giant Trevally (Karan Ledan in Kreol), a large fish that is not food for the birds but predators. A recent footage from BBC shows these fish eating juvenile Sooty Tern that approach or sit on the water, relaxing or drinking is a deadly threat sometimes.

After the juveniles make it out to sea the parents leave them alone. Now they have to show what they have learnt at the colony and survive on their own.

Many will die, but the most skilful will make it to adulthood and after 4-5 years on the wing wandering the Indian Ocean, they will touch the land of Goëlette Island again with the goal of making their own family.

We wish the Goëlettes Island juveniles' good luck for the incredible journey they are going to undertake in a few weeks and we will wait for their return on the magical Farquhar Atoll.



By Licia Calabrese