

# Pirates of the skies

By Jane Lambert



Cosmoledo Atoll is a seabird paradise. It is located in the Aldabra Group within the Seychelles Outer Islands and home to an estimated 5000 to 6000 breeding pairs of masked boobies (*Sula dactylatra melanops*), known locally as 'Fou Zenero'. Of the three booby species present on Cosmoledo, they are the biggest, unfortunately making them an easy target for great

frigatebirds (*Fregata minor aldabrensis*) aka 'gran fregat'. Departing or arriving from their nesting colonies, the masked boobies need to enter airspace patrolled by a fleet of frigatebirds, and this is when the pirating begins.

The frigatebirds instigate a high-speed pursuit and deploy dirty tactics to plunder fishy treasures. The slower and heavier boobies struggle to outma-

oeuvre their lighter and agile attackers. Tails, feet, wings and bills are pulled, feathers are plucked and serious injuries can be inflicted, such as broken bones and loss of eyesight. It does not matter if you are a juvenile or an adult, the harassment is dished out regardless. To make matters even worse, the boobies often do not have one attacker; there can be many frigates hot on their tails.

From the ground you can hear the speed and contact from the attacks, blended together with distressed vocal cries from the boobies. Some are able to evade and ditch into the sea or make it to ground, others fight back and let out a stream of defecation, maybe as a defence tactic or from pure fright. Mostly overwhelmed and no escape, the boobies regurgitate their catch, and with phenomenal precision and speed, the frigatebirds collect the once again flying fish mid-air. When multiple fish are ejected, it provides the trailing frigates an opportunity to swoop down and steal a meal too.

Food by theft is known as kleptoparasitism and although frigatebirds are masters of this foraging technique, they are not always successful, and thus is one of many strategies used within the complex feeding ecology of these unique seabirds.

