

Wildlife galleries

Aride Island is the largest nature reserve in the granitic islands, with more seabirds than any other Seychelles island, five endemic land birds and its own unique plants. It is surrounded by waters with a rich marine life. A new website has recently been launched featuring galleries and information on over 200 species of Seychelles flora and fauna. This is a sample of what can be seen online.

More information can be found at www.arideisland.com

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Land birds



Seychelles Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas pulcherrimus* can be seen in trees, especially on the Aride plateau (never on the ground). It was once exploited as a food source, becoming extinct on many islands including Aride. However, following the end of exploitation birds recolonised by natural means. Habitat conservation is vital to the survival of blue pigeons, because they have muscular gizzards to break down seeds and aid digestion. This means unlike other pigeons, their droppings contain no viable seeds.



Seychelles Magpie-robin *Copsychus sechellarum* was once one of the rarest birds in the world and almost exterminated following human settlement of Seychelles. Its tame demeanour and habit of feeding on the ground makes it highly vulnerable to introduced predators. Seychelles Magpie-robin was eradicated from Aride in the 1930s following the introduction of cats, but now with cats removed, it has been translocated back to the island. Though numbers are low, it is commonly seen on the Aride plateau.



Seychelles Warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis* is a small unobtrusive pale brown warbler often heard before it is seen, giving away its presence with a melodious whistle. Birds move actively through vegetation feeding on invertebrates picked from the underside of leaves. Seychelles Warbler was once confined to Cousin, where the population declined to just 29. Birds have subsequently been successfully translocated to several islands including Aride, which now has the world's largest population.



Seychelles Sunbird *Nectarinia dussumieri* is a small highly active bird, that flits from tree to tree. Although rather dull coloured compared to its continental cousins in neighbouring Africa, the male has bright orange or yellow pectoral tufts and a dark blue iridescence on the head and throat. The female is somewhat smaller and duller. Seychelles Sunbirds disappeared from Aride when the island was cleared of most trees. However, with the regeneration of vegetation, birds naturally recolonised the island.



Seychelles Fody *Foudia sechellarum* or Toktok is a small dumpy endemic weaver, found only on Aride and a few other islands. There is little overlap in diet between Seychelles Fody and Madagascar Fody. The Seychelles Fody is mainly insectivorous, whereas Madagascar Fody is a seed eater. Where the two occur together, the cheeky aggressive manner of the Seychelles Fody gives it a distinct advantage.



Barn Owl *Tyto alba* was introduced to Mahé (race *affinis*) in 1951 and is now resident on the larger granite islands. The introduction was supposed to be to control rats, but instead bird populations have suffered including Fairy Tern and Roseate Tern. The Barn Owl is the most widely distributed species of owl in the world and one of the most widespread of all species of birds, found almost everywhere in the world except for the polar and desert regions.

Sea birds



Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni* is the only small and the only black-and-white shearwater breeding in Seychelles. Aride may hold the largest colony in the world. Birds depart before dawn and at sunset they return from their feeding forays at sea, emitting strange eerie calls. Shearwaters struggle to take to the air from their woodland nest sites, so shortly before dawn, they climb up boulders and tree trunks to gain height prior to lift-off.



White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* is one of the world's most elegant seabirds. They are strong fliers, diving to take fish and squid or even catching flying fish in flight. The white stiletto-like shapes are unforgettable against a clean blue sky. Pairs mate for life and may breed at any time of year. The local name for a tropicbird is *Payanke*, meaning 'straw-in-tail', probably the oldest Creole bird name, used by sailors before Seychelles was even settled.



Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* will attack other seabirds to force them to drop their catch but can also take prey on the wing. It is unable to land on the surface of the water because its small, unwebbed feet will not give sufficient thrust to take off again and the plumage is not waterproof. However, frigatebirds are maestros of flight. They have the lowest wing-load factor of any bird and are surprisingly light, with pneumatic flexible bones that make up just 5% of their weight – less than any other bird.



Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* is smaller and lighter than Brown Noddy with a finer proportionately longer black bill. Birds breed in trees mainly during the southeast monsoon from April to October, but some are usually to be seen at the island year-round. Unlike the more widespread Brown Noddy, it breeds only in the Indian Ocean, the nominate race at Seychelles, Cargados Carajos, Reunion and Maldives, with a second race at western Australia. Aride may be home to the world's largest colony of this species.



Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus* breeds in Seychelles in larger numbers than any other bird. Geolocators and satellite tracking has revealed the long journeys made by birds outside the breeding season, some even visiting the western borders of the Pacific Ocean. In 1995, one Sooty Tern arrived to breed on Aride that had been ringed as a chick on Kermadec Islands, New Zealand in 1961 (13,350 kilometres from Aride).



Fairy Tern *Gygis alba* is the world's only all-white tern. It is famous for its extraordinary habit of laying a single egg on a bare branch. This incredible balancing act is achieved by utilising the more horizontal branches of trees or laying the egg at a notch or fork to provide support.

Fairy Tern was effectively first named by Charles Darwin. In *Voyage of the Beagle* he remarks, "Little imagination is required to fancy that so light and delicate a body must be tenanted by some wandering fairy spirit ..."

Land animals



Whip Spider *Phrynichus scaber* is like a cross between a spider and a prawn. Contrary to its fearsome appearance, it lacks venom and is harmless to humans, preying on insects and baby lizards. Research on Aride reveals that Whip Spiders engage in a complex mating tap dance that lasts several hours. At the end of the process, the female frees herself from the male's clutches and beats him with her pedipalps or grabs at him. He quickly and wisely retreats!



Seychelles Giant Millipede *Sechelleptus seychellarum* is one of the largest millipedes in the world, reaching over 15 centimetres in length. It feeds on dead organic matter such as leaves and wood on the forest floor and plays a vital role in increasing soil fertility by releasing nutrients from decaying organic matter back into the soil. Despite their fearsome appearance giant millipedes are harmless to humans. However, if threatened or handled they can secrete an irritating liquid, which can be harmful if this comes into eye contact.



Bronze-eyed Gecko *Ailuronyx seychellensis* is so named because of the bronze-gold metallic colouration of their eyes, while the body is highly variable in colour. It is one of the largest geckos in Seychelles, up to 20 centimetres. It is mainly nocturnal but can be found by day on tree trunks or sheltering in rock crevices. Insects, nectar, carrion and even seabird eggs are taken. It will swallow its shed skin, probably to recycle nutrients or to avoid leaving evidence which may alert predators.



Wright's Skink *Trachylepis wrightii* is only found on rat-free seabird islands such as Aride where it benefits from the large numbers of seabirds, feeding on discarded fish and squid, fallen or unattended eggs, dead birds and even the droppings of nestlings. Like Aride's unique shrub Wright's Gardenia, it is named after Edward Perceval Wright from Ireland, who visited Seychelles for six months in 1867 and was the first naturalist to collect specimens. Most skinks are small and this is one of the largest species in the world.



Seychelles Wolf Snake *Lycognathophis seychellensis* is a non-venomous snake of up to one metre in length, one of two snake species endemic to Seychelles. There are two distinct colours: yellow phase or dark phase. Yellow individuals have a yellowish-brown back and a bright yellow underside. Dark phase snakes are grey or blackish with a white spotted underside. It has a small head and conspicuous, fairly large, coppery-gold eyes. It is listed as Endangered by IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature).



Aldabra Giant Tortoise *Aldabrachelys gigantea* is the only surviving species of a family once found throughout the western Indian Ocean islands. Most of the Indian Ocean species were wiped out by 1840 following the arrival of European settlers. Aldabra Giant Tortoises were reintroduced to Aride to aid the recovery of Seychelles Magpie-robin. The birds follow tortoises to feed on invertebrates disturbed in the leaf litter.

Coral reef fish



Parrotfish *Scaridae* are grazers, so named due to their parrot-like beaks and often vivid body colouration. There are about 95 species found worldwide, of which 20 are found around Aride. During the day, they spend most of their time grazing algae off the reef which helps keep the corals healthy.

At night, parrotfish hide from predators by wrapping themselves in a mucus cocoon or finding a hiding place in the reef.



Butterflyfish *Chaetodontidae* are among the most colourful and conspicuous of coral reef fishes. There are about 129 species worldwide, of which 20 are found around Aride. Invertivores tend to be polygamous (they form mating pairs but may change partners with each mating). Corallivores tend to be monogamous (they remain with the same mate for life). Planktivores are promiscuous (randomly mate with any member of the opposite sex within the aggregation).



Clownfish live in the warm shallow seas of the Indo-Pacific. There are around 30 known species worldwide. Aride hosts healthy populations of Seychelles Clownfish *Amphiprion fuscocaudatus* and Skunk Clownfish *Amphiprion akallopsis*. They form symbiotic mutualisms with sea anemones and are unaffected by the stinging tentacles of their host. They catch prey by swimming onto the reef, luring fish back to the anemone, which stings and eats them leaving scraps for the clownfish.



Lionfish *Scorpaenidae* have elongated pectoral fins like the mane of a lion when fanned. In addition, they have 18 needle-like venomous fins on their backs and undersides, used for defence. Their colouration alerts predators of their venomous nature, exhibiting contrasting red, white, cream, brown or black stripes. There are about 12 species worldwide, of which at least three are found around Aride. Lionfish have invaded the Western Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico outside of their native range, greatly damaging native fish biomass.



Surgeonfish *Acanthuridae* are oval to elongate compressed fishes with a small terminal mouth adapted for grazing on algae. There are about 86 species worldwide, of which 28 are found around Aride. The distinctive characteristic of the family is that they have one or more pairs of scalpel-like blades at the base of the tail, which may be used offensively or defensively against other competitors, inflicting deep and painful wounds.



Boxfish *Ostraciidae* are small to medium-sized (to 40 cm) fishes with a body almost completely encased in a bony shell. Out of the 26 species in the Ostraciidae family, five have been recorded at Aride. Members of this family occur in a variety of different colours and are notable for the hexagonal or 'honeycomb' patterns on their skin. They swim in a rowing manner and feed on benthic invertebrates. Several species are considered delicacies in southern Japan, although some species are reported to have toxic flesh. 🌿



Bird's-eye view of Aride, seabird citadel of the Indian Ocean.
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