

A voyage for Caribbean Seabirds

Title Documenting new seabird-colony Important Bird Areas, finding previously undocumented colonies and colonies thought to be extirpated: these are just some of the exciting discoveries reported within *Environmental Protection in the Caribbean*'s (EPIC's) ground-breaking *Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles*. Stretching in an arc from Anguilla to Grenada, the Lesser Antilles are the final frontier between the Caribbean Sea and the vast expanses of the Atlantic Ocean. A full seabird census had previously never been undertaken in the region – our knowledge often being based on anecdotal notes from the early 19th century. Over an 11-month study period (2009 – 2010), EPIC's partners *Katharine and David Lowrie*, sailed 3,162 nautical miles, surveying by land and/or sea 200 islands capable of supporting seabirds, with each island surveyed in the winter breeding season and again during the summer. David Wege, Senior Caribbean Program Manager, BirdLife International says the study is "What can only be described as a truly inspirational research voyage" the results are astounding?.



Petit Canouan in June, before burning when regionally important Sooty Tern and Red-billed Tropicbird breeding colonies were present. Photo: Lowrie.

Visiting remote islands that few other sailors will venture near, the study was dubbed by the sailing community as, "a survey of the worst anchorages of the Caribbean." The reason for such remote nesting sites is that seabirds have been ousted from their previous breeding grounds by development. Being mostly ground-nesting, they also have no defenses against voracious introduced predators such as cats and rats that are present on easily accessible islands?, Katharine Lowrie explains. Globally, seabirds are among the most threatened of bird groups, with 80% of seabird species in decline. Prior to European contact, it is believed there

were tens of millions of seabirds breeding in the Caribbean region, now there are under two million. The EPIC *Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles* reveals that four of the 18 species recorded are present at globally significant levels. It also reports that **Battowia IBA** (St Vincent and the Grenadines), followed by **Dog Island IBA** (Anguilla), are the most important individual islands for globally-significant seabird colonies in the eastern Caribbean. One of the distressing discoveries of the study, however, was the extent to which egg collection and hunting for seabird chicks and adults still persists throughout the island chain. David Lowrie recounts, "We repeatedly encountered fishermen whose only reference to the species we were studying was their relative taste. On one island during one day we were greeted by tens of decapitated Brown Booby heads representing 39% of that colony's generation of chicks. On another island Sooty Terns are practically "farmed" for their eggs, with "shoot outs" being reported between rival hunters".



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http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/STV_Battowia-from-Baliceaux-Martha-Lee-300x200.jpg

Battowia viewed from Baliceaux in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Battowia is globally important for Red-footed Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Photo: Martha Lee

The EPIC Atlas provides vital data on this poorly studied group of birds. It includes species accounts for all 18 species; island accounts including abundance and distribution of breeding colonies and threats; detailed methods and data analysis and discussion of the priority breeding sites and species of concern in the study area. Natalia Collier, EPIC President elaborates, "The vision for the Atlas was born out of frustration over the huge gaps in information in the region for simple facts, such as the breeding locations for certain species or the main threats for each site. It was crucial that the Atlas provided transparent, standardised methods and analysis to facilitate future seabird monitoring in the region, and to prioritise conservation efforts". EPIC's Atlas is available from the CreateSpace online store <https://wwwcreatespace.com/3565696> as well as Amazon.com where a Kindle version will soon be available. Purchases through CreateSpace and Kindle return a greater percentage of royalties to EPIC to help cover expenses incurred during the project.