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EPIC EFFORT FOR CARIBBEAN SEABIRDS

Documenting globally important seabird breeding colonies, 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) ground-breaking Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles.

Stretching in a thin 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, with many existing records based on anecdotal notes from the early 19th century.

Over an eleven month study period, between 2009 and 2010, EPIC's partners Katharine and David Lowrie, sailed 3,162 nautical miles, surveying by land and/or sea 200 islands above the high-tide level capable of supporting seabirds, surveying each island in the winter breeding season and again during the summer.

David Wege, Senior Caribbean Program Manager, BirdLife International describes the study as, "What can only be described as a truly inspirational research voyage...the results are truly astounding".

Surveying 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 pushed out from their previous breeding grounds by development. Being mostly ground-nesting, they also have no defences against voracious introduced predators such as cats and rats", Katharine Lowrie explains.

Globally, seabirds are among the most threatened of bird groups, with 80% of species in decline and 90-99% of seabirds lost from tropical islands. 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, with a further 11 species considered significant within the Caribbean region. It also reports that Battowia, part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, followed by Dog Island of Anguilla, are the most important individual islands for globally significant seabird colonies.

One of the distressing discoveries of the study, however, was the extent to which egg collection and hunting of seabird chicks and adults still persist throughout the 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".

The EPIC Atlas provides vital data on this poorly studied group of birds. It includes species accounts for all eighteen 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 with 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, facilitating future seabird monitoring in the region to guide conservation priorities”.

EPIC’s Atlas is available from the CreateSpace online store <https://www.createspace.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.

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Notes for editors

1. Environmental Protection In the Caribbean (EPIC) was founded in 2000 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the United States, with the mission to protect the Caribbean environment through research and community-based action. The organization works throughout the Caribbean, with a focus on the underserved Lesser Antillean region.
2. Katharine and David Lowrie partnered with EPIC to produce the Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles. The Lowries sailed their 75 year old wooden sailing boat (Lista Light) from the United Kingdom to St. Maarten. During the course of the two-year project, they spent over 300 days at sea, undertaking seabird surveys, education and outreach. They can be contacted at www.5000mileproject.org .
3. In addition to the seabird breeding census, a core aim of EPIC’s Atlas was to work with all the nations in the study area, to ensure the on-going conservation of seabirds. During the survey, Katharine and David Lowrie met over 2,000 people, sharing data and training staff, through presentations and workshops. Over 100 popular articles and interviews further raised awareness about seabirds.