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ON THE **move**

Cape Gannets are members of the family Sulidae, the gannets and boobies. The gannets form a closely related group and their taxonomic status has been much debated. At one stage they were considered to be subspecies in a single species, but most authorities now treat them as allopecies. This means they are geographically isolated but not ecologically or biologically distinct, a conclusion supported by the occasional hybrid offspring raised when one gannet species wanders into another gannet species' range.

Cape Gannets breed at six islands off South Africa and southern Namibia. They are most closely related to the Australasian Gannet *Morus serrator*, which breeds in New Zealand and south-eastern Australia. The largest and most distinctive species is the Northern Gannet *M. bassanus*, which breeds in colonies on both sides of the North Atlantic.

above Australasian Gannets (left) are regular visitors to Cape Gannet colonies, with some individuals returning year after year.

All three species breed mainly in summer and disperse to varying degrees in winter. Among Cape Gannets, some adults return to the breeding islands to roost year-round, but juveniles, immatures and some non-breeders disperse at sea, roosting on the water at night. Numbers of gannets visiting colonies outside the breeding season vary considerably each year. In some years, colonies may be all but deserted from May to July, whereas in other years almost as many birds may be present as in the summer breeding season. Interestingly, Cape Gannets recently appear to have become less migratory, with more birds remaining in the colonies throughout the year and fewer ringing recoveries being made from outside the core breeding range.

Off the east coast of South Africa, large numbers of gannets follow the sardine 'run' from the Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal, with a few reaching southern Mozambique. However, at least historically, they dispersed much farther north off the west coast, with some birds reaching the Gulf of Guinea

and West Africa. In 1966 a juvenile from Lambert's Bay was recovered more than 8000 kilometres away off Western Sahara less than two months after fledging. Such birds are likely to encounter non-breeding Northern Gannets, but there are no records of Cape Gannets from any Northern Gannet breeding colonies and Northern Gannets have not been seen south of the equator.

A few Cape Gannets wander even farther at sea, having been recorded from Madagascar, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina and even Peru. Most records from Australasia have been from Australasian Gannet colonies, where Cape Gannets sometimes breed with their antipodean cousins.

Similarly, small numbers of Australasian Gannets reach southern Africa. About 40 Australasian Gannets have been ringed in Cape Gannet colonies, with records from all colonies except Possession Island. Some individuals establish pair bonds with Cape Gannets and return to the same colony year after year, sometimes even raising chicks. Occasionally gannet colonies also attract boobies; Brown Boobies have been recorded from Malgas and Mercury islands and Red-footed Boobies from Lambert's Bay, Ichaboe and Mercury islands.

One of the more intriguing situations involving vagrant gannets occurred on Amsterdam and St Paul islands in the central Indian Ocean, midway between the ranges of Cape and Australasian gannets. Until the mid-1980s, the 13 sightings of adult gannets at Amsterdam Island were all of Cape Gannets. However, when a few pairs started breeding near a relict Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross colony on nearby St Paul Island, they were mostly Australasian Gannets. This tiny colony still survives and now seemingly comprises only Australasian Gannets.

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