



Meet the Northern Gannet

The largest indigenous seabird in the North Atlantic, the northern gannet spends most of its life at sea. These pelagic or sea birds are among the world's most renowned divers, with flocks of up to 1,000 birds descending from heights of up to 130 feet into the ocean. During their first three years, the birds remain at sea year-round.

In the Gulf of Mexico, immature gannets consume large quantities of nutritious, large, shoaling fish as they grow into adulthood, when they migrate to habitat along the North Atlantic.

Northern gannets are among the birds most impacted by the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill. They are being rehabilitated at four wildlife rehabilitation centers responding to the spill. On July 12, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners released 11 gannets on Sanibel Island, FL, in a state park adjacent to J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

Here are a few facts about these distinctive white birds with black-tipped wings:

- In North America, gannets breed in six well established colonies, three in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec and three in the North Atlantic off the coast of Newfoundland.
- The bird lives largely within the waters of the continental shelf from New England south along the Atlantic Coast to Florida, and west along the Gulf Coast to Texas and Northeast Mexico. Large concentrations of adult birds are often seen off the New England coast.
- The female lays a single egg, which is incubated under the webs of the feet. Hatchlings have essentially no motor coordination, but they develop rapidly during the 13-week nesting period.
- Juveniles begin to move south in greater numbers than older birds during their first winter. Fully grown juveniles are a dusky-brown replica of their parents.
- Like other seabirds, the northern gannet takes several years to attain adult plumage, going through various stages of mottled dark-and-white plumages before becoming pure white with black wing-tips at four to five years of age.
- Once a northern gannet fledges from its nesting colony and is in the water, it is apparently unable to take off again for as long as two weeks. The bird is likely to begin its southward migration to the Gulf of Mexico by swimming, not flying.



Michelle Bellizzi, a wildlife rehabilitation specialist, cleans an oiled gannet at the Theodore Oiled Wildlife Rehabilitation Center June 17, 2010. The center in Theodore is one of four wildlife rehabilitation centers established in support of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill response. U.S. Coast Guard photo Petty Officer 3rd Class Colin White.

For many of the birds rehabilitated after being oiled, they have not yet developed the wing muscles of older birds. They may well take a short flight and rest on the beach before taking off again. This does not indicate that the bird is ill or needs help.

Pairs usually bond monogamously for life, and both mates participate in all aspects of parental care – although their parental activities vary over the course of the nesting cycle.

“Gannets are noisy birds and the metallic clangor of a great colony in uproar imparts some of the excitement which grips the birds. I have sometimes squatted in the very heart of a dense nesting mass in the sunset of a fine July evening, when the flood of incoming birds stirred the group to a frenzy of calling as partners . . . Waves of harsh sound rose to a crescendo and died away whilst white plumage glowed in the serried ranks,” wrote J.B. Nelson, a noted researcher.

Birds from the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill are banded with metal federal leg bands with a unique ID number. People who see the birds are asked to report sightings to the National Bird Banding Lab online: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/default.htm> or call 1-800-327-BAND (2263). Reporting the band number and the bird's location will help biologists understand the movements and survival of the birds after their release.