

Nature Note

Gannet



The large, long-winged seabird called gannet is quite silent as it flies over the ocean searching food or a roost. But when it lands on his own rocky islet with a thousand others of its kind, it turns into a noisy chatterbox—especially during breeding season. These birds utter loud quacks, grunts and even whistles as they communicate with each other. They are a fussy and argumentative lot as well, often squawking and pecking at their neighbors that come too close.

Gannets, *Morus bassanus*, have fairly long necks, stout bodies and long wedge-shaped tails. Their legs are short and their toes are connected with webs for swimming. When they are young, their plumage is dark brown with specks. After they are two or three years old, they lose their baby feathers and grow their mature plumage which is usually white with a pale yellow head.

Their beaks and eyes are beautifully edged in black, and their wing tips are also edged in black.

These birds are quite sociable, and usually gather on their breeding spots in flocks as large as 10,000 individuals. They feed on fish—mainly herring, mackerel and menhaden. They catch their prey by hovering over water where a fish is sighted and then drop straight down with nearly folded wings. Sometimes these birds plunge as much as 50 feet below the surface of the water to grasp their prey, sending up spectacular sprays of water as high as 10 feet.

Gannets usually return to their nesting sites year after year. On their chosen narrow ledges facing the sea, they make shallow nests of mud. Both sexes take turns incubating the single chalky bluish egg. The male or female covers the egg with one webbed foot, overlaps it with the other, then settles down over it. Constantly on guard against any egg robber, the parents protect their egg like this for the six weeks of incubation period.

**“They laughed
when I wound up
my shaver...”**



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