

NEW COUNTRY RECORDS

First record and breeding of Cocos Booby *Sula brewsteri* in the Philippines

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Cocos Booby *Sula brewsteri* was initially described as a full species (Goss 1888), and swiftly accepted as such (American Ornithologists' Union 1889), but was lumped with Brown Booby *S. leucogaster* in the mid-20th century (Wetmore *et al.* 1944). Since 2024, the various taxonomic authorities have unanimously treated Cocos Booby as a separate species, based on differences in plumage, soft-part colours and behaviour, including mostly assortative mating in sympatry (VanderWerf *et al.* 2023), combined with mitochondrial DNA divergence (Steeves *et al.* 2003, Morris-Pocock *et al.* 2011). Adult male Cocos Booby typically shows a paler head and neck with brown eyes, while the female exhibits paler brown plumage with a whitish forehead—both in contrast to the uniformly dark-headed appearance of Brown Booby.

Breeding colonies of Cocos Booby are known primarily from the eastern and central Pacific Ocean, but recent records indicate an expansion into the western Pacific, including confirmed breeding in Hawaii and Japan (VanderWerf *et al.* 2023). Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park (TRNP; Figure 1), located in the Philippine part of the Sulu Sea, supports breeding populations of several seabird species (see, e.g., Alaba *et al.* 2024). Here, we report from TRNP the first documented occurrence, and breeding activity, of Cocos Booby in the Philippines and place this record in the context of the species' recent westward range expansion in the Pacific.

OBSERVATIONS

On 23 April 2025, a male Cocos Booby was observed incubating two eggs on a nest on South Islet, TRNP (Plate 1). Subsequently, in late April and early May, a female Cocos Booby attended the same nest, including simultaneously with the male. By June 2025, the nest was no longer present, likely due to exposure to sea-spray associated with strong south-west monsoon winds.

On 4 May 2025, a single male Cocos Booby

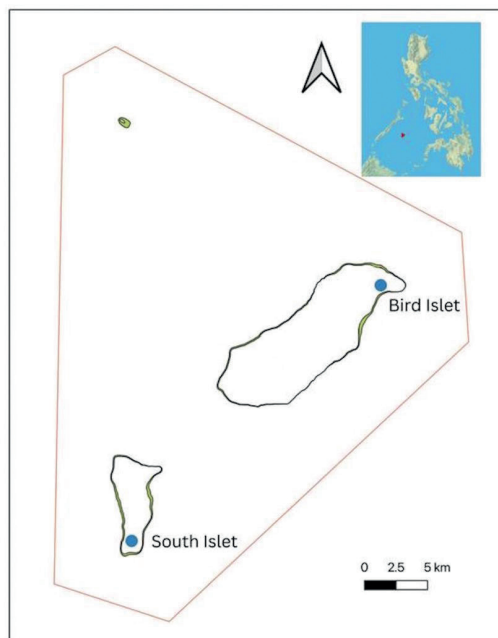


Figure 1. Location of Bird and South Islets, Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, Palawan, Philippines.

was observed roosting on Bird Islet (formerly called North Islet), TRNP (Plate 2). On 1 November 2025, a female Cocos Booby—fitted with a coloured ring (band) on the left leg, which displayed the number 027—was incubating a single egg in a newly constructed nest on South Islet (Plate 3). A male Cocos Booby was observed, but not photographed, standing c.6 m from the nest. Breeding was confirmed on 15 November 2025, when an adult Cocos Booby was observed tending a chick.

Mixed-species nesting interactions were also recorded, both on South Islet. On 15 November 2025, a nest attended by a female Cocos Booby and a male Brown Booby contained a single chick (Plate 4), which was present until at least 8 December. On 25 November 2025, a second nest involved a female Brown Booby paired with a male Cocos Booby (Plate 5).



Plate 1. Male Cocos Booby *Sula brewsteri* incubating two eggs, South Islet, Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, Palawan, Philippines, 23 April 2025. SEGUNDO CONALES, JR.

DISCUSSION

These observations constitute the first confirmed record of Cocos Booby in the Philippines and the first evidence of breeding by the species in the Sulu Sea. Documentation of nesting, egg-laying and successful chick-rearing at the Tubbataha Reefs extends the known breeding range of the species into the western Pacific and complements its recent recognition as a distinct taxon.

Recent studies demonstrate that Cocos Booby has expanded its breeding distribution beyond the eastern and central Pacific, with breeding now documented on multiple islands in the central and western Pacific, including Hawaii and Japan (VanderWerf *et al.* 2023). The presence of breeding individuals at TRNP is therefore consistent with a broader pattern of westward range expansion rather than representing an isolated vagrancy event. Indeed, it is possible that the species had occurred previously at TRNP: an individual observed at Bird Islet in May 2020 (i.e., before Cocos Booby was recognised as a distinct species) was tentatively identified as an aberrant Brown Booby, but conceivably may have been a Cocos Booby.

The occurrence of multiple nests across several months, mixed-species nesting interactions and chick-rearing suggests exploratory or incipient colony formation at



Plate 2. Male Cocos Booby, Bird Islet, Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, 4 May 2025. LISA PAGUNTALAN-MARTE



Plate 3. Female Cocos Booby incubating a single egg, South Islet, 1 November 2025. SEGUNDO CONALES, JR.

the site. Mixed pairing between Cocos Booby and Brown Booby has been reported elsewhere within the expanding range of the former species and is generally associated with low local availability of conspecific mates (VanderWerf *et al.* 2023). Continued monitoring will be required to assess the frequency and reproductive outcomes of such pairings in TRNP.

Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park supports a large and persistent breeding population of Brown Booby, documented through long-term seabird monitoring on the park's islets (Tubbataha Management Office, unpublished data). The size and stability of this population indicate that local environmental conditions are



Plate 4. Paired female Cocos Booby and male Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* with a hybrid chick, South Islet, 15 November 2025. SEGUNDO CONALES, JR.

favourable for solid breeding and may likewise facilitate the successful settlement and continued reproduction of Cocos Booby. The protected status of TRNP, the absence of terrestrial predators and the long-term persistence of seabird breeding colonies suggest that the park may provide suitable habitat for continued expansion of *S. brewsteri* in the western Pacific.

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Plate 5. Paired female Brown Booby and male Cocos Booby building a nest, South Islet, 25 November 2025. SEGUNDO CONALES, JR.

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