

COLORFUL VISITORS

# TROPICAL TRAVELER

## vacationing near Santa Cruz



WALLY SKALIJ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Blue-footed booby sightings are a big deal for birders, one naturalist says.



ABOVE: WALLY SKALIJ/ASSOCIATED PRESS; BELOW: RODRIGO BUENDIA AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A blue-footed booby, above, splashes in a pool Tuesday at the International Bird Rescue Center in San Pedro. The feet on the birds, which live in tropical areas, usually turn blue when they reach adulthood.

### Scientists think blue-footed boobies heading north due to collapse of food supply

By Jason Hoppin

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**LIVE OAK** — On a rocky shelf next to Sunny Cove, UC Santa Cruz student Abe Borker and some friends looked over the water, scanning for an impossibility.

Yet there it was: the blue-footed booby, a subtropical seabird famed from the Galápagos Islands to the Sea of Cortez for its long, pointed beak, clumsy waddle and pastel-colored webbed feet, a combination that makes the bird look like it walked off a Pixar movie set.

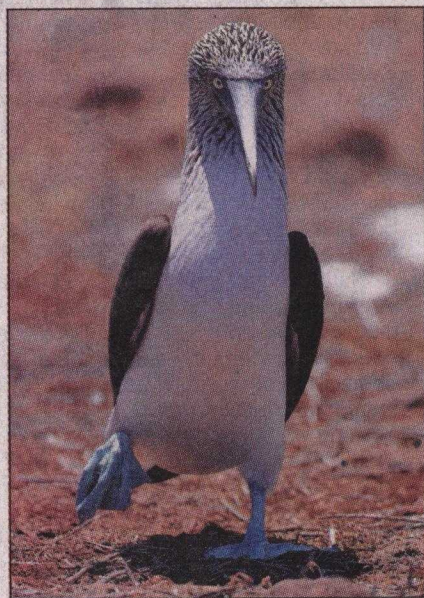
"I was really excited," said Borker, who is studying to obtain a doctorate in ecology and evolutionary behavior. "I'd seen one in Mexico earlier this year, but I never thought I'd see one in Santa Cruz."

Boobies are invading the coast of California with sightings exploding especially in Southern California, an event that hasn't been seen since 1971. They have been spotted as far north at Point Reyes, according to bird trackers, and there have been several local sightings as well.

Most seem to be juveniles, which have yet to develop the tell-tale blue feet. They tend to dwell in flocks of brown pelicans — another migratory seabird — and the first local sightings began Sunday.

"Huge excitement for birders," said Brian Sullivan, a locally based director of eBird.org, a project of the New Jersey-based Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "Right now

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there's lots of birders out there to see and document this invasion."

Sullivan spotted one near Point Pinos. They have since been seen in Capitola, Live Oak and Pescadero, and people such as Monterey birding expert Don Roberson are keeping a sharp lookout for more.

Roberson said he nar-

rowly missed a Sunday sighting. He also rushed out to a lunchtime report of three flying over the Monterey Wharf on Wednesday, to no avail. He aches to see one.

"There's a lot of excitement. It's been 42 years since there's been one in Monterey County. I don't have another 42 years," said Roberson, author of "Birder's California" and an authority on the history of local birding. Why the invasions occur has not been

pinpointed. There have been reports of abundant anchovies in Monterey Bay, which has contributed to a phenomenal number of whales locally.

However, Sullivan said it's more likely the boobies are being pushed up here by the collapse of their food supply in Mexico. Roberson posited that it could be a combination of food scarcity following robust breeding seasons, which may explain why this invasion, as in 1971, features juvenile birds.

Bernie Tershy, a professor with UC Santa Cruz's Coastal Conservation Action Lab, thinks that's a strong possibility as well. He wrote his dissertation on boobies, and notes that while other kind of boobies will hatch one chick, the blue-footed variety can hatch up to four.

"The blue-footed booby are really set up to take advantage of good years," Tershy said. "Their population can increase dramatically during good years."