
Galeota Point: Habitat and Birds: an Area for Study

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SITUATED in the extreme south-east corner of Trinidad, Galeota Point is a one mile (2 km) long peninsula extending south from the eastern coastline and providing ideal shelter from the prevailing easterly winds for Guayaguayare Bay to the west (see Figure 1).

The southern half of the peninsula is the home of AMOCO (Trinidad) Oil Company (ATOC) and is their onshore tank storage facility for the offshore oil wells to the east of the point. As such, this area is fenced off with a security fence and access can only be gained with ATOC's permission and requires a security pass card. There is a smaller tank 'farm' for oil storage, and a small heliport facility, further to the north, which both belong to TESORO Petroleum Company which also has offshore oil wells to the east. Most of the peninsula is however easily accessible by car, and on foot from the road.

The most southerly tip of the point is a rocky promontory about 90 m high, showing all the typical signs of erosion as demonstrated by all the southern cliffs of the island's south coast. There are trees at the top of the cliffs, including a few palms, and then the land slopes gently to the north down through the ATOC industrial complex. The rest of the peninsula is mainly mangrove swamp and woodland, lowlying to the west, and with low cliffs backing the exposed eastern beach. Nearly every conceivable bird habitat exists, and the peninsula and its shores can be easily subdivided into relevant habitat areas for study. My sketch map attempts to show this.

Galeota Point has an added bonus for bird-watchers. Like all distinctive headlands throughout the world, Galeota is a focal point for migration navigation, and at the appropriate times each year a myriad unusual species can be seen moving north or south through the area.

Using the limited time at my disposal, I have been able, over the past two years, (1981 - 1982) to make a casual study of the peninsula's bird life. The following is a rough guide to what I have seen.

AREA 1. This is the most southerly extremity of the peninsula. It consists of the rocks and cliffs and cliff-top vegetation. Here are seen the sea-birds and hawks. Terns predominate; sooties, noddies and common are all present. There are always pelicans and frigate birds (*Fregata magnificens*) about and I have seen an occasional solitary Red-billed Tropicbird, and once, a pair of them. Here also can be seen a resident pair of hawks (sp?), and very often other birds-of-prey, both large and small.

AREA 2. Just west and a little north of the headland itself is the harbour area used by the offshore platform support vessels. There is one particular large rock, just off the main jetty, where about 30 or 40 frigate birds often perch. This small group can be watched leisurely from the jetty. Sharing the

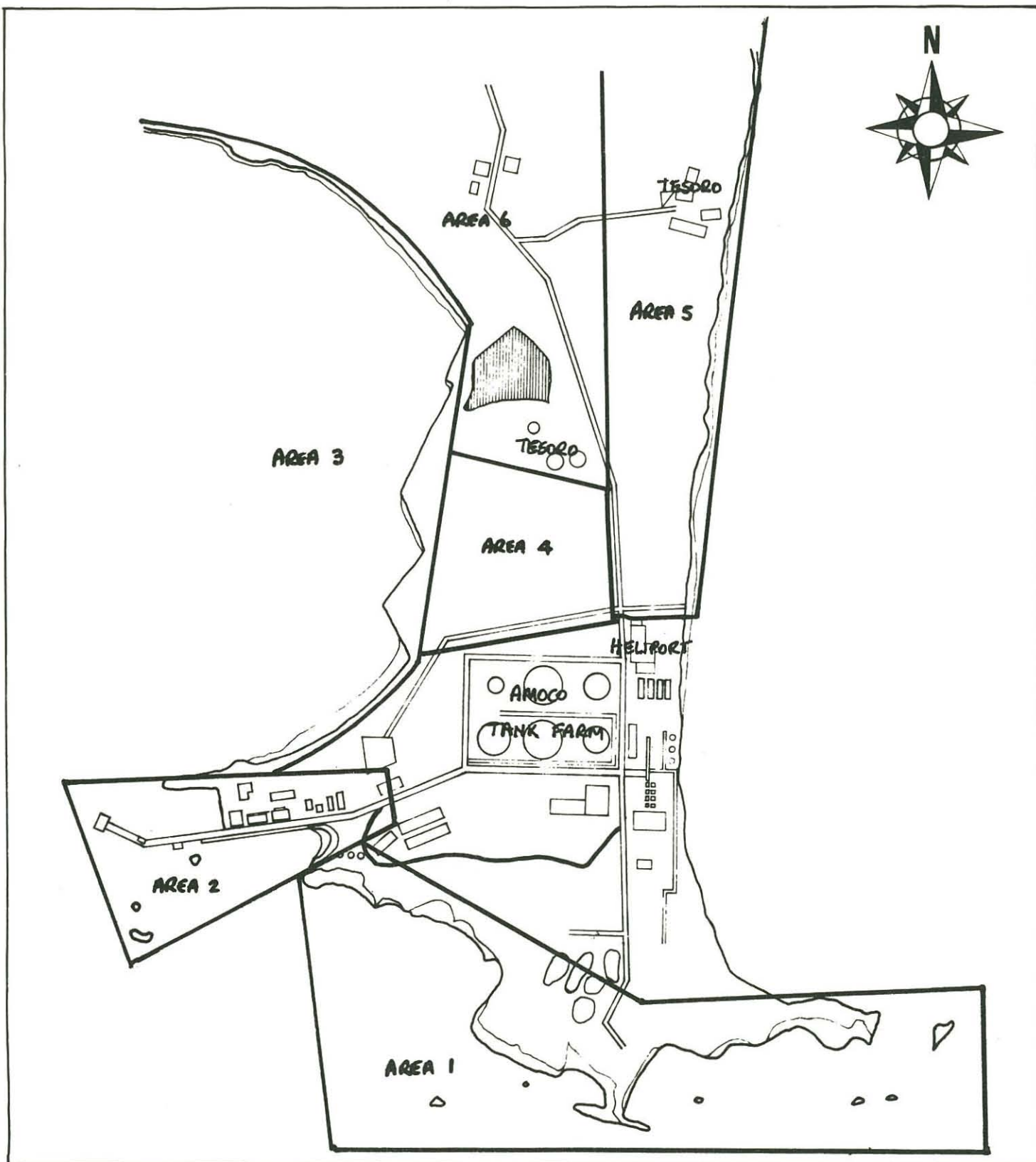
rock are a large number of noddy terns, and a few sooties. There are usually a few pelicans to be seen as well, and occasionally a brown booby. Around about the harbour itself there can always be seen a few scavenging waders and passerines, and quite often there are groups of gulls. The harbour however, is not used by fishing boats, and so the usual attractions for birds are not present.

AREA 3: For me, this is the most interesting area. Sheltered tidal water with sandy beaches expanding at low tide states, with large mud-flats and sand-bars plus coastal mangroves and a small area of sand-dunes. This is wader country and nearly all the locally recorded Trinidad species occur, sometimes in large numbers. The area also attracts common terns and I have seen wintering flocks in excess of 2000 birds.

Roseate terns are often recorded in company with their common cousins, but here I have not been able to positively identify a single roseate. Egrets can always be seen in the area. There is at least one great blue heron, and I have seen as many as 5 at one time. There are often black vultures about. But the stars of the show, for me anyway, are the skimmers. When I first arrived in mid-1980, there was a colony of about 50 birds, and I watched them performing throughout that year and all through '81 until about September when they vanished. To my delight, I spotted 5 birds again on April 13 '82, and from that day on I have attempted to keep a record of their numbers, whenever I can. Also seen regularly in this area is an anhinga or 'snake-bird,' but it is very shy and I have not been able to get close to it. It is a great flyer, a fact which has always puzzled me, for a bird so obviously adapted for underwater work. But this one, anyway, really seems to enjoy its time in the air and I often see it soaring gracefully on the cliff up-currents where it puts the clumsy corbeaux to shame. Ospreys are also common visitors to this area. A group of 4 once spent several days here, and there are seldom days when one is not about.

This bay, particularly its eastern, sheltered end, is a splendid attraction for birds, but it is also frequently the scene of severe surface oil pollution. Polluted river water runs into the bay at its north-west end after every fall of rain, also from drain outlets from the ATOC site, usually associated with rainfall, but by no means always. The harbour is another source of oily effluents, and the prevailing currents always seem to conspire to wash all the waters straight on to the beach areas. Skimmers, feeding the way they do, would be especially prone to suffer from surface pollution. Consequently I have watched very closely for any signs that the birds here have fallen casualty to this curse, but as yet I have not one single scrap of evidence that the birds have suffered at all. The pollution of this lovely bay, and its effects on the environment, needs to be subject to surveys other than mine.

AREA 4: This is a small area of grassed dunes and low-lying mangrove (white mangle). It is the haunt mainly of passerines and herons. I have seen a pair of green kingfishers here once. On August 21, '82 a single adult scarlet ibis appeared, much to my excitement, and was still around the next morning, when I saw it feeding on crabs among the mangrove roots. Sadly, it had gone by the afternoon. This area



MAP showing Galeota Point

is particularly accessible, and is outside the ATOC fence, it has always struck me as being eminently suitable for more exhaustive study.

AREA 5: The east coast strip. This is the home of a resident black hawk, *B. anthracinus*. This bird has only been seen on its own, usually near the ATOC heliport. The area is mainly wooded and is the home of passerines and other woodland species. It is also a popular roost for herons and egrets.

AREA 6: Another mainly wooded area; dry woodland and mangroves to the west. Here, though, the mangroves are the taller red and black varieties, and here also is 'Tesoro's Shame.' This is a small lake which is so blackened and polluted by oil spillage that all life has forsaken it. This area is, however, accessible for study and is largely unspoiled. It is the habitat for a large number of woodland and coastal species. I confess that I have neglected it, and I have no specific records here.