

Pelagic Birding Trip to Pulau Perak – In Search of the Brown Booby Colony

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Pelagic birding is a specialised type of birdwatching that is focused on finding seabirds that spend most of their lives on the open ocean and only come ashore to breed. While pelagic birding trips are known to occur in countries like the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand, it is not commonly done in Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, pelagic trips usually occur off the coast of Tanjung Dawai in Kedah (Zaini 2024) as well as off the coast of Mersing in the South China Sea.

Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, a remote speck of land in the Malacca Strait (Plate 1), had long called to us for one reason - its renowned Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* colony. On from 19-20 May 2025 seven birders - Afiq Abdul Rahman, Ashwin Kalai Chelvan, Xian Lim, Ng Jia Jie, Low Kok Hen, and Choo Eng Tan - along with two seasoned boatmen from Jetty Nosh Fishing and Sri Maharani, set out with cameras and binoculars in hand, hearts brimming with anticipation.

Day 1

We departed from the jetty early in the morning, around 0800 hrs. The morning greeted us with clear blue skies and calm waters - perfect conditions for our offshore voyage.

Spirits were high as the island slowly emerged on the horizon, a rocky sentinel surrounded by deep blue waters.

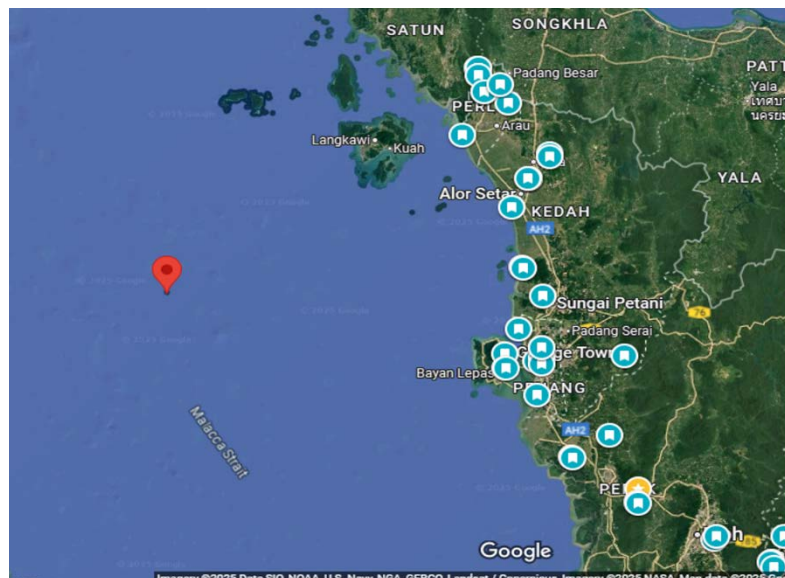


Plate 1: Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia location @Google Maps

During our four-hour journey to Pulau Perak, we were treated to sightings of several pelagic bird species, including the Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*, Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Hydrobates monorhis*, and Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*. The excitement peaked when we spotted our main target - a Brown Booby actively hunting for fish. Energised by the sighting, we eagerly asked the boatman to follow the bird, hoping for a closer look at this remarkable seabird in action (Plate 2).

During the journey, we made several stops in order for our boatman to fish and collect some bait. They were intending to do some fishing at Pulau Perak later in the day for our dinner. Nothing like having fresh seafood while out in the open sea!



Plate 2: Brown Booby feeding method: target 'locked' - diving action - successful catch, Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, May 2025.

As we approached, the silhouette of Pulau Perak became increasingly visible (Plate 3). Our hearts pounded with worry, fearing that the Brown Booby colony might no longer be there. However, our assumptions were proven wrong - we witnessed a large number of Brown Boobies taking flight as we neared the island. The long journey was rewarded with a truly breathtaking sight.



Plate 3: View of Pulau Perak from the sea and the team with boatmen, Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, May 2025.

We began photographing the birds. Not only were there Brown Boobies, but also a colony of Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*. We took the opportunity to capture as many photos as possible. After photographing, we conducted a short survey, during which we recorded several migrant species such as the Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, Amur Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone incei* and Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*.

As for Brown Boobies, we were thrilled to come across a remarkable sight - a pair of Brown Boobies in the midst of mating (Plate 4), with several juveniles present nearby (Plate 5). Observing this natural behaviour up close felt like an extraordinary privilege, as such moments are not commonly witnessed in the wild especially in Malaysia. It was, without a doubt, a true jackpot for our trip, adding immense value to our journey. The presence of both adults and juveniles was also an encouraging sign, indicating that the colony is actively breeding and sustaining its population on Pulau Perak.



Plate 4: Adult Brown Boobies mating, , Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, May 2025.



Plate 5: Adult Brown Booby with chick (left) & juvenile in flight, Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, May 2025.

As evening approached, we spotted two Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* soaring through the sky (Plate 6). Its long, slender wings and graceful gliding made for an impressive sight, adding yet another highlight to our journey. By nightfall, the rain arrived, first in drizzles and then in sheets. The boat pitched and rolled in the growing swell - a reminder that sea birding often comes with a dose of sea adventure.



Plate 6: Lesser Frigatebirds soaring in the sky, Pulau Perak, Kedah, Malaysia, May 2025.

Day 2

Dawn on the second day was met with low, heavy clouds. Thunder rumbled in the distance and soon the storm was upon us. Thunderstorms lashed the area, and the once-playful swell turned into choppy, restless waves. We saw two Short-tailed Shearwaters flying. Earlier in the morning, we were delighted to spot a small pod of dolphins gracefully surfacing and swimming near the island. Their sudden appearance brought excitement to everyone on board, and we quickly turned our attention to observing their movements. However, due to the brief encounter and the distance between us, we were unable to determine the exact species. Even so, the sighting added a special touch to our journey, making the day feel even more rewarding and memorable.

The boatman advised us to begin our journey back as the weather conditions were still favourable, ensuring a safe and comfortable return. Taking his advice, we set off from Pulau Perak with smiles on our faces, feeling deeply satisfied with the day's experiences. The incredible wildlife sightings, from the Brown Booby colony to the unexpected dolphins, had made the trip truly unforgettable. As the boat glided across the open sea, we reflected on the adventure with a sense of gratitude and happiness, cherishing the memories we had created together. The trip successfully met its main objective of documenting the Brown Booby colony and recording additional seabird species. Despite adverse weather on the second day, the diversity observed confirms Pulau Perak's role as a significant offshore birding location.

Key Findings and Observations from Pulau Perak

Our trip to Pulau Perak yielded several noteworthy observations. Our survey was conducted from the boat and supplemented with photographs. The nesting colonies of Brown Boobies and Brown Noddies appeared healthy and thriving, with an estimated 200 individuals of each

species. Encouragingly, we also observed several juveniles, indicating ongoing breeding activity with about 50 breeding pairs. Additionally, Bridled Terns were seen roosting on the island, further highlighting its importance as a seabird habitat. It's heartening to see that the two keystone species of Pulau Perak are doing well, and we hope their populations will continue to grow.

Beyond the resident seabirds, we also encountered several migratory species using the island as a temporary stopover, including the Tiger Shrike, Amur Paradise Flycatcher, and Dark-sided Flycatcher. These sightings underscore Pulau Perak's role as a crucial rest point along migratory routes. In the surrounding waters, we spotted pelagic birds such as Lesser Frigatebirds and a Short-tailed Shearwater, suggesting the island serves as a significant landmark for ocean-going species. The nearby waters may also provide an important feeding ground. It would be fascinating to monitor the area throughout the year to observe seasonal variation in pelagic bird presence.

While reaching Pulau Perak isn't the easiest journey, the rewards are well worth the effort. The island offers reliable sightings of Brown Boobies and Brown Noddies, with the added potential to encounter other unique seabirds and migratory species along the way. For birders and nature enthusiasts alike, Pulau Perak is a destination that truly delivers.

Acknowledgement

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References

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Historical Breeding Numbers of Brown Booby and Brown Noddy at Pulau Perak

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Brown Booby (Wells 1999)

1949-1956: 4,500-5,000 breeding pairs observed.
1973: 700-800 breeding pairs noted.
1974: 50 breeding pairs among 500 birds.
1975-1976: 60-600 breeding pairs noted in six surveys.
1980: 250 breeding pairs observed.

Brown Noddy (Wells 1999)

1955-1976: A colony of 400-500 breeding pairs observed in three reports.

Wells (1999) notes a number of threats to the nesting pelagic birds. By the 1970s "*a dense population of Malaysian House Rat *Rattus diardii*, introduced and reinforced from fishing boats...*" that feed on the bird eggs. "*By 1980, much of the formerly bald island, including parts of the favoured summit ridge, had been colonized by a dense, in places waist-deep mat of grass and ferns (*Nephrolepis*), completely excluding ground-nesting birds...*" "*However, such effects have been secondary to unfettered predation by people*" i.e. egg and chick poaching by fishermen.

A recent survey of bird life at Pulau Perak in June and August 2004 (Ramli *et al.*, 2008) noted 1,000 Brown Boobies and 5,000 Brown Noddies present. Breeding activities were recorded but breeding pair numbers were not provided.

It is possible that the adult population fluctuates and varies throughout the year. What we require are breeding records. Note that a return visit to the island in August 2025 documented 150 Brown Boobies and 150 Brown Noddies (<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L45505658/recent-checklists>).

Wells (1999) anticipated that Brown Boobies may no longer be breeding residents at the Pulau Perak island colony. This recent survey and the one by Ramli and colleagues is heartening as some breeding is still taking place. It would require a concerted effort of habitat restoration and an eradication of all pests, with sustainability built in, to bring the breeding colony of Brown Boobies and Brown Noddies back to the status of the 1970s. It may also encourage the breeding of other pelagic birds. This is a worthwhile conservation project for a bird-nature group to undertake.

Reference

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