



MAY 2015

Dear TAG supporters,

WE HAVE REACHED OUR TARGET! A huge thank you to everyone who has supported us - we could not have done it without you! The tags have been ordered and will be ready for June when we will travel to Ortac to tag the Gannets.

How do you like your eggs?

During the breeding season, Northern Gannets only lay one egg which is incubated for a month and a half. Unlike other birds they do not have a small featherless area on their underside (called a brood patch), so eggs are incubated using their large webbed feet. During the breeding period Gannets actually increase the blood flow to their feet to keep their eggs warm; once the breeding season is over blood flow to the feet is reduced to prevent heat loss. The egg shells are relatively thick which helps keep them intact during incubation. Compared to their body size Northern Gannets actually have relatively small eggs. They are around 3.6% of the adult's weight which isn't much when you weigh 3kg!

So what is inside a gannet egg? Well, the egg consists of 15.5% yolk, 72.5% albumen and 9.6% shell. The yolk of an egg is the food source for the embryo and contains all the fat in the egg. The albumen, also known as the egg white, contains most of the proteins and water of the egg. The embryo appears as a small flat disc on the surface of the yolk. Gannet eggs have a very small energy content compared to other bird species as the yolk makes up a smaller percentage of the egg. This is because gannets invest very little in egg production. As they have a plentiful food supply for their chicks, development can continue once the chick has hatched so the chick does not have to hatch as developed as those of many other bird species. It is also known that Gannet eggs have high water content. This is something you might expect from a bird that spends its life at sea!



Aggressive Nesters!

When males have found a suitable breeding spot they will attempt to attract a female. To show their availability females will fly over the colony with their neck outstretched and this tells the male that they are available for courtship. In return the male will shake his head in a similar way to when he is guarding the nest but instead of having his wings outstretched they are closed. Gannets are monogamous which means they will stay with the same bird over many years, if not their entire lives.

When it comes to defending their nesting site Gannets are extremely territorial and confrontations between birds are commonplace! Attacks usually happen between birds of the same sex and, interestingly, a female Gannet will not react if a male approaches her nest but she will aggressively defend it if another female approaches. If a female is confronted by an aggressive male that is defending his own nest then she will lower her head, exposing the back of her neck and the male will then take her neck in his beak and fling her out of the nest!

Fights are most common between males that are occupying nests for the first time. These can be quite extreme and are often followed by gestures that can also be seen outside of the breeding season such as pointing their head towards their neighbours with their beak pointing downwards and wings slightly outstretched to show ownership of a nesting site.

Fun Fact: Most Gannet fossils date back to the Miocene period 23 million years ago! They flourished until the end of the Pleistocene 2.5 million years ago then dramatically declined. This is probably due to the increase of marine mammals competing for food.

