



With a wingspan approaching 8-feet, the war bird looks somewhat like a flying "W" in the sky. (Photo courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

War birds have quite the history

The mid-morning sun was already pounding us in the cockpit of the 45-foot sport fisher as we trolled baits 25 miles offshore of Islamorada, in the Florida Keys. The gulfstream was slick calm, adding to the mid-summer heat, and served as an indicator of poor fishing to come. We called these summer days the "doldrums."

Suddenly the captain screamed from the flybridge, "War bird up ahead, wetting his wings." That was the signal to us in the cockpit to hold on, because it was going to get busy real soon. As soon as we pulled upstream of the war bird, the outriggers snapped, and we were hooked up with a double on sailfish. Thank you, Mr. war bird.

The frigatebird, or *Fregata magnificens* for you scientists, is the largest of the five species of frigate



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

birds, and the only one found in North America. The name comes from the French mariners' name for the bird, la fregate, which means a fast war ship. For the offshore angler, they are affectionately known simply as "war birds."

War birds are mostly black with very long, angular type wings and a deeply forked tail. Their body is 3-feet long and they boast an 8-foot wingspan, weighing in at close to 4 pounds. Female war birds have a white chest and are larger

than the males. The war bird is the only sea bird in which the male and female look completely different.

War birds are a warm water bird, spreading out from the North Carolina coast south through the Florida Keys, then west to Texas and on to the coast of California. They sometimes travel inland, such as crossing the Florida I-10, from the ocean to the other, but they are rarely seen inland or around freshwater.

Unlike other water birds, frigatebirds do not have waterproof plumage, so they can't land on the surface of the ocean. They do not have the oil glands necessary to waterproof their feathers, so if they land on the water, it's game over and they drown.

Before you feel sorry for them, realize they can stay aloft on an air current almost indefinitely. They rarely flap their wings, but when they do, the beats are slow and deep. When they are high in the sky, they look like a flying "W."

During a 2016 study, researchers found that frigatebirds were spending as two months in the air without ever touching the ground. Aloft, they are always on the hunt for food, following schools of bait fish for many miles. When

predator fish move under the bait fish, such as the case with the sailfish, the bait moves to the surface where the soaring war bird will dive on them, grabbing a meal on the fly.

That "wetting their wings" is what the offshore angler is looking for. The war bird will give away the moving school of bait and the fish underneath, such as sailfish, dolphin or mahi mahi, tuna and marlin.

Which fish under the bait attacks the bait school, bait fish will pop out of the water and often into the hooked beak of an awaiting war bird. The angler will then get in front of the bait fish and have a fair shot at the big boys underneath them. Truly the war bird is the angler's best friend.

When it comes to mating, frigatebirds are seasonally monogamous, meaning that males only look for and mate with one female per season. Once mated, frigate birds will nest in a colony where the female will lay up to two eggs. For the first three months, both parents take turns feeding the young, after that the babies become the mother's problem until they are on their own at around eight months.

One of the reasons the

frigatebirds are endangered is that it takes so long to rear a chick. This means they cannot breed every year. It is typical to see young as big as their parents waiting to be fed.

The war birds are not an endangered species, but the populations are in trouble. The main problem appears to be habitat destruction of potential breeding grounds for housing and resorts to be built. Introduction of ground predators and overfishing are other potential problems.

On the plus side, war birds can get quite fat compared to other sea birds. There have been documented cases of 30-year-old frigate birds in the wild.

You might say this is all fine and interesting, but we probably won't see any war birds in Colorado; not so fast. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) staff member John Martin has reported multiple sightings of a bird the Cornell Lab of Ornithology calls a "black pterodactyl-like bird that soars effortlessly on tropical breezes using a deep forked tail to steer."

Frigatebirds are being sighted in Colorado, Kansas, Texas, Illinois, Indiana, Tennessee and a

few other states. These are places far away from the tropical seashores where they normally live. Some researchers speculate the war birds are refugees that have been blown way off course by the historic hurricane season.

Let's hope that the coming cold weather will push these fantastic sea birds back to the warmer waters where they live. I have had many fine days offshore fishing, thanks to my wing fishing companions; days that I might have otherwise been skunked. There are a few more offshore days coming up in my future and I look forward to visiting some of my old friends, the war birds, in their long life span. See you some of the same birds I fished with before.

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