

# The birds of Playa Tarqui, Manta, Ecuador

Rolf Jensen

Birders visiting Manabí, perhaps while exploring Parque Nacional Machalilla, might do well to spend a few hours checking marine birds on a beach in one of Ecuador's most populous cities: Manta.

All photographs taken at Playa Tarqui, Manta, Manabí, Ecuador.

**1** The promise of food scraps attracts birds such as Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*, Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla* and Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* to the fish market on Playa Tarqui. February 2014 (Rolf Jensen).

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Rolf Jensen sadly passed away in 2022. This article was finalized before Rolf's death and is published posthumously and exactly as accepted, as a mark of respect.



>> BIRDING SITES TARQUI BEACH, ECUADOR

2 Habituated to humans, birds such as Peruvian Booby *Sula variegata* and Great Egret *Ardea alba* allow very close approach. Also pictured are Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*, Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla* and Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*. November 2014 (Rolf Jensen).

Flanking the Pacific, on the north side of the city of Manta, Playa Tarqui is well known for its fish market and the nearby *ceviche* restaurants, while the further-flung stretches of this beach are popular with locals for swimming and other seaside activities. Few people, however, seem to have grasped its birdwatching potential. When I first arrived in Manta – the capital of Manabí province – in mid-March 2013, I visited Tarqui initially to see the fish market and sample the famous seafood, but pollution put me off swimming there. Over the next few months, I occasionally visited Tarqui and was surprised to note a somewhat different collection of bird species on every visit.

It gradually dawned on me that this beach had potential as an urban nature reserve because of the quantity of its birdlife, much of which was attracted by the availability of food connected to the fish market – and apparently not deterred by moderate levels of pollution. Moreover, many of the birds were extremely tame and approachable, being habituated to people around the fish market – and therefore offer good photographic opportunities.

From early October 2013 to February 2014, to gather data to support a protected-area proposal (see below), I counted Tarqui's birds on a weekly basis along a set census route covering the beach area from the fish market, south to the service station and parking lot near the overpass in central Manta. This route along the *malecon* (esplanade) follows the shoreline for c.2.5–3 km, depending on tide, and includes two small, polluted estuaries, a stormwater drain area, and some mudflats and scrub around an old breakwater. I found that mid-morning was a good time to count, as most birds had finished morning feeding and were resting and digesting on the beach and mudflats, making for an easier and more accurate census.

During 2013–14, I recorded some 75 species along the census route. Top counts in January–February 2014 yielded more than 1,000 individuals of c.20 species. Among the most iconic birds of Playa Tarqui, especially around the fish market, are undoubtedly the great numbers of Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* and Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Both species are tame and easily approached, giving excellent views as they sit around or sail overhead. Peruvian Pelican *Pelecanus thagus* also occurs on occasion. Snowy