

## **Magnificent Frigatebird**

### **by Celeste Silling**

A few weeks ago, I was lucky enough to see several Magnificent Frigatebirds flying over the Surfside Jetty County Park. They're always a delight to see! From about mid July through August is the best time to see these remarkable birds soaring over the Gulf Coast.

While these birds are usually far up in the sky when you see them, they are easily identifiable. They have a long, hooked bill, a forked tail, angular wings, and 7 foot wingspan. They are usually gliding up above, similar to how vultures fly.

The Magnificent Frigatebird spends much of its life soaring high in the sky, and can even stay aloft for months at a time. One might think this would be tiring, but they don't use much energy. They hardly flap their wings while gliding, which allows them to stay aloft for long periods of time and travel far distances.

Many seabirds and waterbirds have waterproof feathers to protect them from the ocean and rain. Magnificent Frigatebirds, however, do not have waterproof feathers. This is because they do not land or dive in the ocean! These birds have figured out a few ways to stay dry while hunting for fish in the ocean.

The Magnificent Frigatebird will fly for long periods of time in search of food. They look for fish or other prey that swims close to the surface. Then they swoop down and sweep it up, keeping their feathers dry. These birds feed on fish, squid, and jellyfish while at sea.

Another feeding tactic is piracy. Magnificent Frigatebirds are notorious for harassing other birds in flight until they drop or regurgitate their food. The frigatebird will then catch the food in midair and chow down. For all of their criminal behavior, Magnificent Frigatebirds have earned the name "man-o-war birds," which seems pretty appropriate.

The birds that we see flying over Surfside and other parts of the coast are almost always females or juveniles, which have a plain white or black chest. Adult males, however have a vibrant red throat pouch. They use this pouch to attract a mate during mating season. Perched males will display to females by inflating their throat pouch, clattering their bills, quivering their wings, and swiveling back and forth.

Magnificent Frigatebirds breed in mangroves, trees, and shrubs. They prefer to nest in colonies on islands, where there is little disturbance. To build their nests, they use woody materials to build a platform, then lay the eggs. Both the male and female incubate 1 egg for 53 to 61 days. Once the chick hatches and is halfway grown, the male departs the colony while the female continues to tend the young.

It takes about 20-24 weeks for the chick to first fly and the juvenile will stay with its mother for up to a year. This difference in parental care allows the male to breed each year while the female breeds every other year.

Next time you're out on the coast, take a look in the sky. If you see what looks like an angular vulture gliding over the ocean, you just might be looking at a Magnificent Frigatebird!