

# Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis* and other pelagic birds from the Thrissur coast, Kerala

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Information on oceanic birds of India is scanty. Although it is known that several migratory species visit Indian seas, a comprehensive list of species, their distribution and abundance are found lacking. The off-shore bird surveys held in the Malabar region (see Praveen *et al.* pp. 66–69 in this issue) had resulted in sightings of pelagic birds like the Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes* and Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*. Taking note of the fact that no such survey was ever undertaken in central Kerala, an off-shore bird survey was jointly organised by KeralaBirder, Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN), and Cochin Natural History Society (CNHS) in the Laccadive Sea off Chavakkad, Thrissur (10°30'N, 76°02'E) on 31 July 2011. A fishing boat took the team 42 km into the sea. Birds were observed using binoculars (8x40 & 10x50), and photographed with digital cameras equipped with zoom lens (400 mm & 600 mm).

The weather was cloudy with occasional showers and the sea was calm. The following salient observations were made during this trip, which lasted for about eight hours (0800–1600 hrs).

**Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*:** At least a hundred individuals were seen, flying either solitarily or in small groups, typically just above the water, dipping into it occasionally. This species was readily identified by the white rump and dark upper, and under parts, with legs trailing behind the tail. Care was taken to check as many individuals as possible for the presence of other potential storm-petrels with white rumps like, White-bellied- *Fregetta grallaria* or Black-bellied- *F. tropica* Storm-petrel. Considered a non-breeding visitor off the western coast of India, Sri Lanka, Lakshadweep, Maldives, and Chagos, it breeds in the sub-Antarctic region in the Southern Ocean (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Birds arrive in Indo-Sri Lankan waters in May and stay for approximately six months (Phillips 1955). Though it is



Fig. 1. Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*, July 2011.


 A photograph showing two dark-colored birds, identified as Swinhoe's and Wilson's Storm-Petrels, flying over a vast expanse of blue ocean. The birds are captured in mid-flight, with their wings spread, against a background of gentle waves.
 

Fig. 2. Swinhoe's- & Wilson's- *O. oceanicus* Storm-Petrels, July 2011.

reported to be a straggler off the Kerala coast, with just two former reports (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011), it is grossly under-reported as mass migrations have been reported from the coasts of India and Sri Lanka (Robertson 1994). Fishermen call them, 'karivandu,' Malayalam for 'black beetle,' because they are prominently black and fly around restlessly like bees.

**Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*:** While carefully observing the Wilson's Storm-petrels, a single bird was observed that did not show a white-rump. It was squabbling with two Wilson's Storm-petrels, and appeared slightly larger than them. This bird was photographed and later, on closer scrutiny of the photographs, revealed a moderately forked tail, and feet that did not project beyond its tail. The whole body appeared sooty-brown with the head lighter than the rest of the body (Fig. 1). Its upper-parts showed small pale shafts on the primary coverts (Fig 2). The dark rump and forked tail eliminates all regular and hypothetical storm-petrels of the region except for the Matsudaira's Storm-petrel *O. matsudairae*. 'Our' bird differs from this species by its smaller size (slightly larger than Wilson's), shorter tail, and lack of extensive pale flashes on the upper primaries. Swinhoe's Storm-petrels breed in the north-west Pacific and are reported as a non-breeding visitors to the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Past sightings from the Andamans, and Lakshadweep require confirmation (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). This might be the first confirmed sighting of the species from India territory.

**Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes*:** About 1,000 birds were seen in two large congregations, one of them at least 500 strong, and many smaller flocks. This is the only large, dark shearwater in our region with a heavy dark-tipped pale bill. It breeds in the South Indian Ocean and Australasia, and ranges in the Pacific-, and Indian- Oceans. It is thought to be a regular visitor from March to October, at least from Lakshadweep to western Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). About 500 birds in a day, with more than 80 birds in one congregation, were seen on an earlier pelagic trip off Kannur coast in September 2010 and this was reported to be the largest congregation from

the country (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). However, the 500 strong congregations in this survey, surpass that count. It is known by the local name 'Oolikakka,' which in Malayalam means 'diving crow.' The large congregations were seen near fishing boats that had cast nets around shoals of fish. The birds were in a noisy feeding frenzy. Evidently, they were taking advantage of the fishing activity and also benefited from the by-catch thrown into the ocean by fishermen.

Apart from these key species, a jaeger *Stercorarius* sp., was seen resting on floating vegetation but flew off before our boat approached it, remaining unidentified. Around 40 Bridled Terns *Sterna anaethetus*, and 15 Sooty Terns *S. fuscata* were also encountered, including juveniles of both species. Three Crested Terns *Thalasseus* sp. were also observed, flying higher than the other pelagic birds.

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