

Significant pelagic bird sightings from off-shore waters of the Malabar coast, southern India

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Offshore trips from the western coast of India have been few and hence our knowledge about the birds of our seas is limited. KeralaBirder and Malabar Natural History Society (MNHS) jointly organised three offshore expeditions during 2010–2011 off the coasts of Malabar, from Azheekal, Kannur district (11°56'59"N, 75°18'58"E) and Chombala, Vatakara, Kozhikode district (11°33'98"N, 75°35'35"E) in northern Kerala (Table 1). Except for one (Chombala Harbour), all the surveys were initiated at Azheekal estuary, where the two major rivers, Kuppam, and Valapattanam, empty into the sea. This is also a major fish landing centre in north Kerala. The continental shelf in this area

extends c. 80 km (45 nautical miles) (Courtesy: Google Earth); our observations were not in the deep sea, and hence, this was not strictly a pelagic survey (Bailey 1968). A total distance of approximately 75 km along the coastline was covered during the surveys covering the offshore of Vatakara, Kozhikode district in the south to the coast of Kanhangad in Kasaragod district in the north (Fig. 1).

About 32 birdwatchers from Kerala and Karnataka participated in these surveys and this large number of observers in the boat ensured at least two people on the lookout always, even during the hottest parts of the day. Birds were observed using binoculars or with the naked eye; though spotting scopes were rendered useless on the boat, at least two photographers were always quick to pounce and snap most of the birds. If the birds were floating in the sea, the engines of our boat were switched off and it was navigated slowly near the birds in a wide circle that allowed closer observation and images. Birds were identified using Harrison (1985, 1996), Grimmett *et al.* (1998), Kumar *et al.* (2005), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005). Identifications were later compared and confirmed from the photographs taken.

Table 1. Details of Offshore Trips

Date	Timings	Start Point	No of Observers	Distance from the coastline	Direction
18 September 2010	0800–1600 hrs	Azheekal	16	5–15 km	SW
19 September 2010	0600–1500 hrs	Azheekal	18	15–30 km	NW
3 April 2011	0800–1600 hrs	Chombala	6	5–10 km	NW
4 April 2011	0700–1730 hrs	Azheekal	15	20–40 km	SW
5 April 2011	0700–1600 hrs	Azheekal	10	20–40 km	NW
28 May 2011	0915–1600 hrs	Azheekal	5	15–45 km	NW
29 May 2011	0600–1430 hrs	Azheekal	4	10–35 km	SW



Fig. 1. Map of pelagic expedition.

Significant sightings

Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes*: Considered a scarce but regular summer visitor to the Arabian Sea between March and October (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005); but till date only one wind-blown specimen has been collected on the Malabar coast (Palot 2008). We found it to be exceedingly common in September, and fairly common in May. The bird was however absent during April. In September, birds were following shoals of mackerel *Rastrelliger* sp. in loose flocks even within 10 km of the coast. A raft of 75 birds (Fig. 2) seen on 18 September 2010 is probably the second largest congregation observed on the Arabian Sea (De Silva & Perera 1994; Van Den Beg *et al.* 1991). It is of interest that fishermen call this bird 'Ayila Kakka,' meaning "mackerel-crow" in Malayalam.



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Fig. 2. Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes*, September 2010.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *P. pacificus*: This is a new record for Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011), but has been reported sporadically from the eastern Arabian Sea (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Our observations indicate that this bird could be easily overlooked as Flesh-footed Shearwater in the sea and could escape detection. One of the shearwaters photographed on 28 May 2011 was identified later as this species – the thinner beak, less contrast of the black tip on the otherwise paler grey beak, slightly elongated head and the longer tail that projects beyond the wings at rest are field marks which separate the species from its congener (Fig. 3). Wings are apparently held well-forward in bow-shape but this feature is tricky in the field, presumably dependent on wind conditions, and hence should be used with caution. From a good view of the underside in flight, the legs fall short of tail tip. This single bird was seen approximately 30 km from the coast in a mixed fishing flock comprising two Flesh-footed Shearwaters, a Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, and several Bridled- *Sterna anaethetus* and Sooty- *S. fuscata* Terns.

Persian Shearwater *P. persicus*: About 40 birds seen on two days in April (4-5 April 2011) including a flock of 23 floating on the sea, which is perhaps the largest congregation recorded from the western coast of India (Fig. 4). Separation of this species from Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri*, with which it has been lumped for long, is complicated; however the presence of dark axillaries separates it from the latter. The birds were mainly seen near the trawlers, feeding on the leftovers along with Bridled- and Common- *S. hirundo* Terns. Their feeding method was similar to dabbling ducks - immersing their head in the water for few seconds and picking up the fish while swimming leisurely. While feeding, the wings were frequently held open for maintaining the



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Fig. 3. Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*, May 2011.

Aswini Kumar Bhat

Fig. 4. Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus*, April 2011.

balance. Ours is the second record of this species from Kerala, the first being more than a century ago (Ferguson & Bourdillon 1903-1904). The birds might have been on spring passage from the warmer equatorial waters to their breeding islands near the Arabian, and Makran coasts. Local fishermen call this bird 'Matthi Kakka,' meaning "sardine-crow" in Malayalam.

Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*: Generally considered a spring to fall visitor off the western coast of India, and a common "pelagic, but less often inshore" (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). However, there have been just two previous reports from the coasts of Kerala, in 1957 (Philips 1957), and 1987 (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). During this survey, two sightings of single birds in flight were noted on 28 May 2011 and on both occasions the clear white rump and lack of white in the under parts were clearly seen. On a close view, it was possible to note the extension of the toes beyond the tail. The first sighting was a lone bird at a distance of 20 km from the coast while the second sighting was among a mixed fishing flock of birds comprising of numerous Bridled- and Sooty- Terns, and Wedge-tailed- and Flesh-footed- Shearwaters c. 30 km from the coast (Fig. 5). Both birds were flying in an erratic manner, flying close to the waves, and resembled a House Swift *Apus affinis*. It has been noted previously that this species is present in large numbers during some years, and totally missing in others from the coasts of southern India (Philips 1957).

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*: Three sightings during September, and none recorded during April–May. One of the birds was a juvenile which looked not unlike an adult Brown Booby *S. leucogaster* but could be told apart by the white



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Fig. 5. Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, May 2011.

collar and upper breast which does not meet the brown of the back and upper-wing. Another bird was an older immature with brown speckling on its head, neck and forewing was seen on both outings in September. All the birds were seen alongside swimming group of gulls *Larus* sp. It is regularly wind-blown onshore, every monsoon (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011).

Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*: Considered a vagrant to the western coast of India by Rasmussen & Anderton (2005); with just two sightings off the Kerala coast from the Lakshadweep Sea (Prince 2008). Its congener and potentially confusable Pomarine Jaeger *S. pomarinus* has been observed more frequently (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). During these trips, several jaegers were observed on all days during September (Fig. 6) and April and all birds which were positively identified were of this species. The birds were seen pirating food from Common- and Crested- Terns *Thalasseus* sp. Some of the chases lasted up to a minute, and occasionally two jaegers ganged up on a single tern. Interestingly, Bridled Terns were never chased, though they were present in good numbers at the same locations – much in contrast to prior observations (De Silva 1987). It is surprising that these offshore trips failed to record Pomarine Jaeger.

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*: Though there is a reported mass-migration along the western coast of India and Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; De Silva 1987), there have been only three records of this bird from the Kerala coast; two were wind-blown recoveries, way back in 1978 and 1979, while the third was a sighting in 1987 (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). This is one species which was recorded on all days of the pelagic survey and must rank as one of the commonest bird species of our offshore waters. On 19 September 2010, at least 100 birds were recorded flying south, singly or in small loose flocks, all of them between 15-30 km from the coast, indicating a distinct south-bound migration. A massive 500 strong fishing flock was recorded on 5 April 2011. The birds were seen in groups of 30-100 scattered in an area of approximately 1 km² and were actively feeding, fluttering over the water, and diving to the surface to pick up fish. It regularly followed fishing trawlers and congregated near the by-catch which was thrown away by the vessels. Areas with good

number of Bridled Terns always had associated pelagic birds like skuas and shearwaters. Our sightings also included several birds in juvenile and transitional plumages.

Sooty Tern *S. fuscata*: Though this tern is reported wind-blown more often than the previous one, there has been a general paucity in sightings during these offshore trips. Two juveniles and two adults were recorded on 28 May 2011 and about 70 birds, including one dead bird floating in the sea, were recorded on 29 May 2011. Confusion with the previous species exists for birds seen far from the boat.

In summary, three gull species and eight tern species were recorded during these surveys (Table 2). Numerous Common Terns seen possibly include two subspecies. One bird photographed in September was in breeding plumage and sported a full black cap, long black bill and legs indicating the race *longipennis* (Fig. 7). A flock of birds photographed in April had dark wash on their under-parts, black beak and reddish legs (Fig. 8) indicating possible *minussensis*. Most of the Crested Terns *Thalasseus* sp. seen far out at sea were Great Crested Terns *T. bergii*. Lesser Crested Terns *T. bengalensis* were seen closer to the coast.

Besides birds, movements of butterflies such as crimson rose *Atrophaneura hector*, common rose *A. aristolochiae*, great eggfly *Hypolimnas bolina*, lime butterfly *Papilio demoleus*, common crow *Euploea core*, dark blue tiger *Tirumala septentrionis*, common grass yellow *Eurema hecabe*, common emigrant *Catopsilia pomona*, and tawny coster *Acraea terpsicore* were noticed during the survey, some of them as far as 30 km from the coast. Large scale migration of the global skimmer dragonfly *Pantala flavescens* was also noted during September. Sightings of dolphins were frequent and the species was confirmed from photograph as Indo-Pacific hump-backed dolphin *Sousa chinensis*.

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Fig. 6. Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, April 2011.

Table 2. Summary of observations on birds during the offshore trips

Species	September 2010		April 2011			May 2011	
	18	19	2	3	4	28	29
Flesh-footed Shearwater <i>Puffinus carneipes</i>	500	100	0	0	0	12	40
Wedge-tailed Shearwater <i>P. pacificus</i>	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Persian Shearwater <i>P. persicus</i>	0	0	0	40	40	0	0
Wilson's Storm Petrel <i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Masked Booby <i>Sula dactylatra</i>	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
Parasitic Jaeger <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	7	5	3	15	10	0	0
Unidentified Jaegers <i>Stercorarius</i> sp.	8	5	0	5	6	0	1
Bridled Tern <i>Sterna anaethetus</i>	4	100	10	300	650	100	70
Sooty Tern <i>S. fuscata</i>	0	0	0	0	0	4	70
Total	521	211	13	360	696	119	181
Common Tern <i>S. hirundo</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Gull-billed Tern <i>Gefochelidon nifotica</i>			√	√			
Great Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	√		√	√	√	√	√
Lesser Crested Tern <i>T. bengalensis</i>	√	√	√	√	√		√
Sandwich Tern <i>T. sandvicensis</i>		√	√	√			
Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	√		√		√	√	√
Heuglin's Gull <i>Larus heuglini</i>	√	√					
Brown-headed Gull <i>L. brunnicephalus</i>				√	√		
Common Black-headed Gull <i>L. ridibundus</i>				√			

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Fig. 7. Common Tern *S. h. longipennis*. September 2010.

Sandeep Das

Fig. 8. Common Tern *S. h. minussensis*(?). April 2011.

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