

# A note on pelagic bird sightings off the Mulki coast of southern India

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The first ever pelagic bird survey along the south-western coast of India was conducted off Kannur, Kerala, in September 2010. Encouraged by the sightings of Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*, Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes*, etc., during that trip (see Praveen *et al.* 2011 in this issue), two similar pelagic trips were organised off Mulki on the Karnataka coast, situated 20 km north of Mangalore city. This note provides details on the pelagic birds sighted during these surveys.

## Methodology

Both the surveys were conducted off Mulki by employing small boats. During the first trip, we did not venture out deep into the sea, but travelled along the coast. During the second survey, two fishing boats were employed and we ventured as far as 12 km into the sea. Details of these trips are given in Table 1, and the route marked in Fig. 1. The birds were usually identified visually with binoculars and efforts were also made to take photographs of birds seen and the same were examined later to ascertain the identity of birds seen.

## Significant sightings

Six pelagic bird species were sighted during the two trips. The details of our sightings are as follows:

**Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus*** One bird was sighted about 10 km off the coast of Mulki on 4 April 2011. Two more individuals were sighted near Kaup Paar Island, about 8 km off the coastline on the same day. On both occasions, the birds were seen close to groups of Bridled- *Sterna anaethetus* and Little- *S. albifrons* Terns and they flew away without giving much opportunity to observe. The species was identified later by their photographs (Fig. 2), where the pale brown upper parts and extensive white undertail coverts were considered as pointers.

Table 1. Details of pelagic trips

Date	Duration	No of Observers	Distance from the coastline	Direction
29 Jan. 2011	0830-1300 hrs	8	08-10 km	NW
04 Apr. 2011	0800-1730 hrs	14	10-12 km	NW & SW

**Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*** Only one individual of this species was seen on 4 April 2011. This was near Kaup Paar Island about 10 km off Mulki coast. The bird gave only a very little time to observe as it flew away along the direction we were moving and disappeared. The bird was later identified using photographs (Fig. 3) where the long pointed central rectrices were considered as a pointer.

**Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*** Around 40-50 of these birds were observed during the entire trip on 4 April 2011. Once we observed a gathering of 25-30 birds feeding on fish. There have been only three records of this tern from Karnataka (Madsen

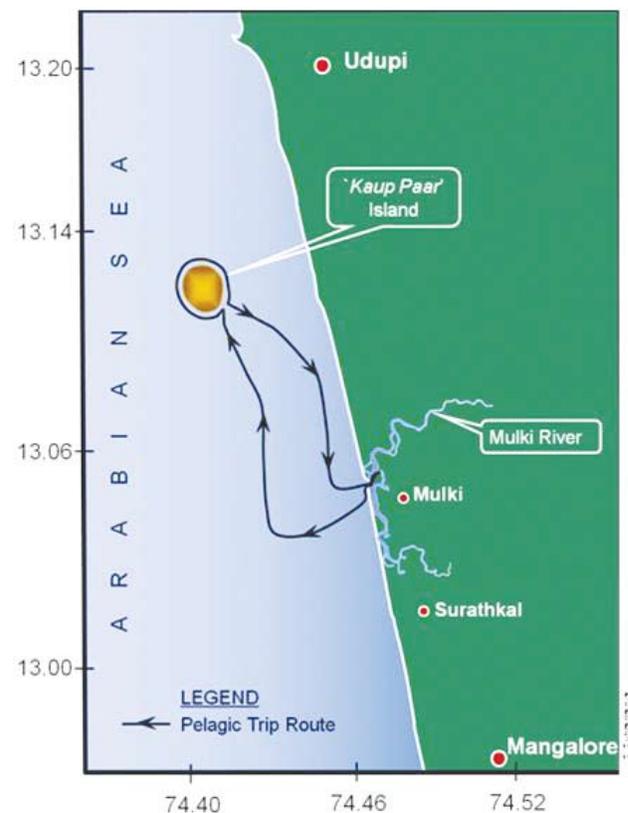


Fig. 1. Route map of the pelagic trip.



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Fig. 2. Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus*.

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Fig. 3. Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*.

1988; Madyastha & Madyastha *in prep.*) and hence the present sighting of this large group is interesting.

**Sooty Tern *S. fuscata*** One bird was sighted on 4 April 2011 as one of the boats was heading out to sea at the mouth of Mulki River. Previous records from Karnataka were all of wind-blown birds recorded from the coastal region on three separate instances (Madyastha & Madyastha *in prep.*).

Other seabirds sighted during the two trips, are presented in Table 2.

Details on the occurrence of pelagic bird species off Karnataka coast are very few. Much of the available records come from the wind blown species records of Anon. (1966), Madyastha (1988), Madsen (1988, 1990), and Madyastha & Madyastha (*in prep.*). Thus, the two pelagic surveys off the Mangalore coast have helped in understanding the occurrence of pelagic birds out

**Table 2.** Other coastal and sea birds seen during the two trips

Date	Species	No.
29 Jan 2011	Caspian Tern <i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	3
	Brown-headed Gull <i>Larus brunnicapthalus</i>	3
4 April 2011	Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1
	Brown-headed Gull <i>Larus brunnicapthalus</i>	2
	Great Black-headed Gull <i>L. ichthyaetus</i>	2
	Gull-billed Tern <i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	2
	Lesser Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	6
	Great Crested Tern <i>T. bergi</i>	6
	Little Tern <i>Sterna albifrons</i>	15
Common Tern <i>S. hirundo</i>	1	
	White-bellied Sea Eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>	1

in the open sea. The sightings of Persian Shearwater and Parasitic Jaeger, are the first records of their pelagic presence in the state.

We consider the sighting of the Persian Shearwater, to be significant as this is a rare record of the species for Karnataka. Karnataka Bird Checklist (Praveen 2011) contains a reference to Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri* and we presume that, this record could have been of *P. persicus*, which was earlier considered as one of the populations of Audubon's Shearwater, but now considered to belong to a separate *persicus* clade (West Indian Ocean): *P. l. persicus* which breeds on Khuriya Muriya Islands (Arabian Sea) and ranges throughout the Arabian Sea (Wikipedia 2011).

Unfortunately, the pelagic bird distribution off the coast of Karnataka is still sketchy. A proper understanding of the pelagic bird movements, their seasonality, status and ecologies can only be better understood by carrying out regular concerted surveys and also find reasons for the same, as for example, the seasonal dynamics of fish availability in the Arabian Sea off Karnataka coast.

The two pelagic surveys indicate that if ventured deeper into the sea (more than 10 km), there are good chances of sighting the pelagic birds. These trips also stress the difficulty in identifying the species on such off-shore trips and the importance of photographs for successful identification.

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