

# Wind-blown pelagic birds from Odisha, India

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Until recently, the data on Indian pelagic avifauna has been compiled mainly from records of wind-blown birds (Ali & Ripley 1987; Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013). Most of these birds have been brought to land by strong monsoon winds on India's western coast, and the occasional cyclones that hit the country's eastern coast.

On 12 October 2013 a very strong tropical cyclone, called Phailin, hit the Odisha coast at midnight. On the following afternoon, ornithologists Umakanta Biswal and Subhendu Bhattacharya visited the Munduli Barrage (20°26'N, 85°44'E) in Cuttack district, Odisha, 30 kms from the state's capital, Bhubaneswar, as they anticipated that some sea birds may have been blown inland by the strong cyclonic winds. They were rewarded with the sight of three jaegers, *Stercorarius* species, feeding and resting on the turbulent river. The birds were seen the next afternoon too when they returned with Ar Shakti Nanda and Mahesh Kar. On the morning of the 15 October, PMU, Swetashree Purohit, and Avinash Khemka revisited the area. On that day, five jaegers, a noddy (*Anous* sp.), and a dark-backed tern (*Sternidae*) were sighted. The jaegers floated on the fast-flowing waters of the barrage, and would occasionally take short flights, skimming the water and rising again.

Photographs were taken of all the birds using digital cameras, but since the observers were not familiar with these birds, they were not identified in the field. Once back from the field, the images were circulated on various online forums. The noddy was identified conclusively as Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* while the dark-backed tern was identified as Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*. The initial set of jaeger images generated much discussion, with suggestions ranging from Parasitic Jaeger *S. parasiticus* to South Polar Skua *S. macconnicki*, but the majority weighed towards a Parasitic Jaeger, based on the overall size, and the fact that it was the commonest jaeger sighted during recent pelagic surveys (Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Praveen 2013).

At this time, DK was in touch with Klaus Malling Olsen with respect to the identification of a jaeger photographed at Kochi during a pelagic trip, which showed characters of a Long-tailed Jaeger *S. longicaudus*. This discussion triggered DK to revisit the images that were circulated from Odisha. PMU shared more images of the birds and selected images of three birds were sent by DK to Klaus Malling Olsen, Rob van Bemmelen, and Robert Flood, who also agreed with the identification of the three birds as Long-tailed Jaegers (Klaus Malling Olsen, Rob van Bemmelen, and Robert Flood: *pers. comm.*, emails of 28 November 2013). Later, one more jaeger with very similar characters was found while collecting more images. Thus, out of five jaegers seen, four had been identified as Long-tailed and one had to be left unidentified, as its photograph was unclear; but this last bird could also be a Long-tailed Jaeger as it was similar in size and behaviour to the other four birds.

## Identification

### Jaeger 1 [86]

This bird is an adult Long-tailed Jaeger; it is aged on the basis of its plumage, which is similar to that of a typical adult in breeding plumage. The key pointers for identification are an overall sleeker build with thin neck and small rounded head, and a narrow but well-defined cap, a short, but stout, all dark beak, greyer coverts noticeably paler than remiges, and pointed central tail feathers. All the above-mentioned characters differentiate it from a Pomarine Jaeger *S. pomarinus*. Except for its pointed tail, which a Parasitic Jaeger could have, rest of the features distinguish this bird from that bird.



Photo: P. M. Ukil

86. Adult Long-tailed Jaeger.

### Jaeger 2 [87-88]

This bird is identified as an adult/immature Long-tailed Jaeger. It is aged on the progress of moult: this bird shows two fresh, and six old, primaries (Juveniles are expected to start the moult only between November and January and hence would have shown more number of older primaries, say 8-10 on this date) (Howell 2007), and possibly unmarked under primary coverts (Fig 3). The key pointers for identification are an overall smaller build, overall grey tones to upper body, short beak, pale tarsus for this age (Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers which are more than an year old generally show some dark patches on tarsii), coverts noticeably paler than remiges and pale primary shaft visible only on two outer primaries (prominent in three or more primaries for Pomarine and Parasitic). All the above-mentioned characters differentiate it from both, the Pomarine, and the Parasitic Jaegers.



87. Immature/Adult Long-tailed Jaeger.



Photos: M. Kar

88. Immature/Adult Long-tailed Jaeger.

### Jaeger 3 [89-90]

This slightly heavily barred bird is identified as an adult Long-tailed Jaeger, its age determined based on the uniform under wing coverts. The key pointers for identification are overall smaller build with small round head and large eyes, short but stout all-dark beak, overall grey tones to upper body, pale coverts contrasting with darker remiges, pale primary shaft prominent only on two outer primaries (*contra* three or more primaries for Pomarine and Parasitic), pale tarsus (Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers which are more than an year old generally show some amount of dark patches on tarsus), lack of any visible pale bases to primaries and pointed central tail feathers. All the above-mentioned characters differentiate it from a Pomarine Jaeger, and, except the pointed central tail feathers, from the Parasitic Jaeger as well.



Photo: A. Rathor

89. Adult Long-tailed Jaeger.



Photo: A. Khenka

90. Adult Long-tailed Jaeger.

### Jaeger 4 [91-92]

This bird is identified as a possible second year Long-tailed Jaeger, its age being based on lack of pale tips to upper wing coverts and uniformly barred under wing coverts. The key pointers for identification are its overall smaller build with small rounded head, short all dark beak, overall grey tones to upper body, pale coverts contrasting with darker remiges and similarity in size to other birds in the field. All these characters separate it from both, Pomarine, and Parasitic Jaegers.

Long-tailed Jaegers generally show prominent pale shafts on only two outermost primaries, but this image shows pale shafts on middle primaries as well. It is assumed that, here, this effect could have been caused due to aging and bleaching of feathers.



Photo: A. S. Nanda

91. Jaeger 4 (Immature Long-tailed Jaeger).



Photo: M. Kar

92. Immature Long-tailed Jaeger.

## Discussion

The only published record of a Long-tailed Jaeger from the Indian region is a sighting of three birds near Lakshadweep (Bourne 1989), but the recent field guides (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) still treat this species as a vagrant/possible species. During the recent review and update of the Indian Checklist (Praveen *et al.* 2013), the Long-tailed Jaeger was excluded from the checklist due to a lack of sufficient confirmed sightings, but with a note that it is a very probable bird as there are confirmed records from Maldives and Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The current sighting (from east coast), along with a recent sighting in west coast during a pelagic trip from Mangalore in 2012 (Karuthedathu 2014) indicates that they are indeed not uncommon in Indian coast.

Published data (Praveen *et al.* 2011; Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Praveen 2013) from the previous pelagic trips from India's western coast indicate that Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers are common along that coast, but among the windblown birds of Odisha, these species were absent. Indeed, it would be interesting to find out if jaeger distribution along the eastern coast differs from that of the western. The fact that Long-tailed Jaegers were spotted at Munduli Barrage perhaps indicates that they may not be as rare as considered earlier, and that future pelagic trips off the eastern coast should keep a lookout for them.

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# Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* sighted in Delhi after nearly a century

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The sighting of a single Oriental Scops Owl *Otus sunia* in its rufous morph (cinnamon-bay phase) at Raghapur village in South Delhi at approximately 1700 hrs on 05 March 2011 is the first known record from Delhi State since 1925 [93]. It was not sighted subsequently. The site is just a few yards away from the Delhi-Haryana border with only a broken barbed wire fence marking the boundary between the two states. The bird was observed for about forty minutes, until fading daylight and cold winds made it difficult to continue observation. It was found asleep in the bare thorny branches a 'keekar' tree *Acacia nilotica indica* that was putting out new leaf. The tree was along a dirt track through ripe mustard fields, which were being harvested. The sleeping owl occasionally turned its head and opened and closed its eyes. The strong winds blew its prominent ear tufts

backwards almost flattening them to its head.

As shown in the photographs [94], the plumage was the typical rufous morph of the cinnamon-bay phase described in Ali & Ripley (1969). The bird's bare parts were also as described there: iris golden yellow, bill horny yellow tipped blackish and feet dingy yellowish. The wider habitat where the owl was found was a mix of agricultural and human habitation (see the background picture).

The only known previous sighting of the Oriental Scops Owl in Delhi was in 1925 when two sightings were made in February and March. Note at that time, and well into the 1970s, it was considered a subspecies of the Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*. There have been no further reported sightings from Delhi or indeed Haryana (Harvey *et al.* 2006). Table 1 summarizes the three known sightings.