

# A compilation of frigatebird sightings from 2014, including Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi*

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**S**mall numbers of frigatebirds have been regularly reported from Indian coasts every year during the south-west monsoon. Most of these reports are of birds that have been blown towards the land by strong monsoon winds (Sashikumar et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Many of these birds have been identified either as Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*, or Great Frigatebird *F. minor*. Though there have been a few reports of Christmas Island Frigatebird *F. andrewsi*, all of these are not sufficiently substantiated to be considered definite (Praveen et al. 2013). The only record, according to Praveen et al. (2013), was a specimen in the collections of Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Kolkata that has been subsequently identified as a Great Frigatebird (Maheswaran & Alam 2014). While Great-, and Lesser Frigatebirds are more widespread, and treated by IUCN as of 'Least Concern', Christmas Island Frigatebird has a breeding range confined to Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, and is a 'Critically Endangered' species.

This note describes seven frigatebird sightings from the Indian coast during the 2014 south-west monsoon season, summarised in the table below:

## Details of sightings

### 1. Christmas Island Frigatebird from Ankola, Karnataka on 27 July 2014.

This bird was spotted by VM at the fishing village of Belambar, Ankola (14.64°N, 74.29°E), Karnataka. The bird was sighted around 0630 hrs just after heavy winds and rains. It was observed chasing Brahminy Kites *Haliastur indus*. The bird was seen in the area for around three–four minutes.

## Identification

- The buffy head with black breast band indicate it is a first-year bird.
- The belly patch is broadly rounded to squared at the posterior end.
- The belly patch has a pointed anterior resulting in breast band forming two convex arcs on either side.
- Prominent square-ended axillary spurs originating from the sides and pointing forwards.
- The inner wings look relatively broad, flaring at the tertials.



Photo: Vineeth M.

95. Juvenile Christmas Island Frigatebird.

**Table 1. Frigatebird sightings from the Indian coast during the 2014 south-west monsoon**

Date	Place	Species	Reporter
27 July 2014	Ankola, Karnataka	Christmas Island Frigatebird	Vineeth M
28 July 2014	Chennai, Tamilnadu	(Presumed) Lesser Frigatebird	Mymoon Moghul, A Rajaram
03 August 2014	Canagunim, Goa	Lesser Frigatebird	Prasanna Parab
06 August 2014	Udupi, Karnataka	Christmas Island Frigatebird	Vijayalakshmi Rao
17 August 2014	Alappuzha, Kerala	Christmas Island Frigatebird	Aneesh Sasidevan
27 August 2014	Rameswaram, Tamilnadu	Christmas Island Frigatebird	Sakthi Manickam
04 September 2014	Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu	Christmas Island Frigatebird	S. S. Davidson

- Relatively large in size (compare the wing length with the length of the kite in [95])  
The last five points together suggest this bird to be a Christmas Island Frigatebird.

## 2. (Presumed) Lesser Frigatebird from Chennai on 28 July 2014.

This lone bird was spotted by A. Rajaram, and MM at Chennai, Tamilnadu ( $13.04^{\circ}\text{N}$ ,  $80.28^{\circ}\text{E}$ ). It was seen flying in the morning from north to south along Marina beach [96]. The sighting was for just about a minute.

### Identification

- Structure, including the long wings, beak, and tail confirms as frigatebird.
- The all black body with prominent axillary spurs point to a possible adult male Lesser Frigatebird.



96. (Presumed) Adult Lesser Frigatebird showing the white axillary spur.

## 3. Lesser Frigatebird from Goa on 03 August 2014.

This bird was spotted by PP at Canaguinim ( $15.13^{\circ}\text{N}$ ,  $73.94^{\circ}\text{E}$ ), Goa [97]. The bird was seen at 1000 hrs; it came from a westerly direction, in from the sea, near a cape, above a cliff. At the same time, five White-bellied Sea Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* were seen in the same area. It was cloudy and raining, but not windy. The bird was observed soaring for about 20 minutes before it disappeared, moving along the coastline.

### Identification

- The buffy head with black breast band indicate that it is a first-year bird.
- The black of the flanks compresses the belly patch toward the posterior, giving the patch concave sides, and a somewhat triangular shape.
- Prominent axillary spurs originate from the front of the belly patch, and are long and square ended.
- The bill is relatively small.

The last three points suggest this bird to be Lesser Frigatebird.

## 4. Christmas Island Frigatebird from Udupi on 08 August 2014

VR spotted this bird at Malpe Beach ( $13.36^{\circ}\text{N}$ ,  $74.69^{\circ}\text{E}$ ), Udupi District, Karnataka, India [98]. VR saw the bird at 0356 hrs flying from east towards west, i.e., from land towards the sea. At around 0410 hrs, it was seen again, soaring with Brahminy Kites. The bird disappeared towards the sea at 0413hrs.



97. Juvenile Lesser Frigatebird.

Photo: Prasanna Parab

### Identification

- Complete black hood, white collar, breast and belly, and a pink bill. This indicated that the bird is a female and a "near" adult.
- Extensive white belly patch and breast with a few black spots.
- Black breast tab.
- Prominent axillary spurs pointing slightly forward and ending with a squarish tip.
- Relatively longer and strong pink bill.
- Relatively large in size (compared to the Brahminy Kites around), with broad inner wings.
- The small black spots on the breast/belly are quite typical of Christmas Island Frigatebird, probably indicating some lingering immaturity (i.e., might be a fifth- year bird).

The last six points suggest this bird to be a Christmas Island Frigatebird.



98. Female Christmas Island Frigatebird.

Photo: Vijayalakshmi Rao

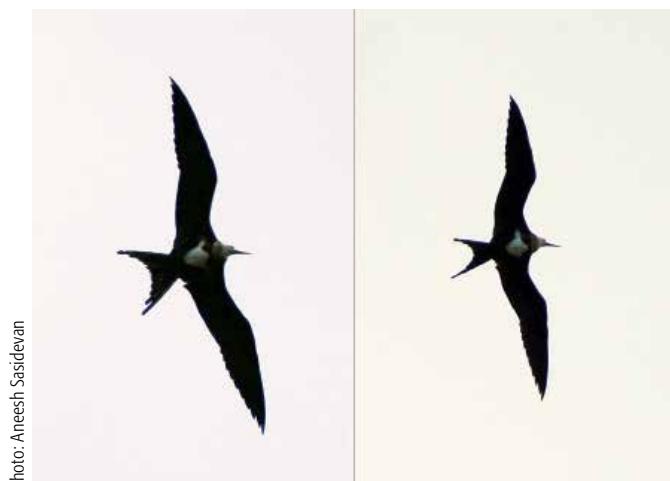
## 5. Christmas Island Frigatebird from Alappuzha on 17 August 2014

AS spotted this bird at Purakkad ( $9.35^{\circ}\text{N}$ ,  $76.36^{\circ}\text{E}$ ), Alappuzha, Kerala [99]. When initially seen, crows *Corvus* species were chasing the bird. To escape, it quickly gained height, and then later disappeared towards the land (away from the sea). The bird was seen in the area for about five minutes.

## Identification

- The buffy head with dark breast band indicate that it is a first-year bird.
- The belly patch is broadly rounded at the posterior end.
- The belly patch has a pointed anterior end resulting in breast band forming two convex arcs on either side.
- The axillary spurs originate from flanks and are long and prominent, and angled forward.

The last three points together suggest this bird to be Christmas Island Frigatebird.



99. Juvenile Christmas Island Frigatebird.

## 6. Christmas Island Frigatebird from Rameswaram on 27 August 2014

This bird was spotted by SM at Rameswaram (9.28° N, 79.31° E), Tamilnadu [100].

## Identification

- The buffy head with black breast band indicates a first-year bird
- The axillary spurs originate from the flanks and are long and prominent.
- The belly patch is broadly rounded to squared at the posterior end.
- The belly patch has a pointed anterior resulting in the breast-band forming two convex arcs on either side.
- The bill is relatively strong.
- Relatively large in size, with broader inner wings, and bulging tertials.

The last five points together suggest this bird to be a Christmas Island Frigatebird.

## 7. Christmas Island Frigatebird from Kanyakumari on 4 September 2014

A local resident found this bird in an exhausted condition at Manavalakurichi (8.14°N, 77.30°E), Kanyakumari [101]. It was handed over to Tamil Nadu Forest Department, who's standing team in charge of rescue operations took the bird into care for the next few days. The officials contacted SSD and Robert



100. Juvenile Christmas Island Frigatebird.

Photo: Sankthi Manickam

Grubh who followed up the sighting and identified the bird as an adult Christmas Island Frigatebird. The bird was given fish, but it refused to eat, and finally succumbed on the fourth day; it was not preserved.

## Identification

- The complete black head with orange-red gular pouch indicates that the bird is an adult male.
- The belly appears to be white with the rest of the underbody black.

These points suggest this bird to be an adult male Christmas Island Frigatebird.



101. Juvenile Christmas Island Frigatebird.

Photo: S S Davidson

## Summary

The status of Christmas Island Frigatebird in India was unclear for a long time until Praveen et al. (2013) analysed all past records and suggested that most sight records from India were untenable in the absence of satisfactory documentation, and some of them were cases of misidentification of Great-, or Lesser Frigatebirds. The sight record of a juvenile from the Andamans (Saxena 1994) probably was this, but confirmation is desirable (Praveen et al. 2013), as the reported photograph could not be traced. Though Praveen et al. (2013) considered the specimen of the individual collected from West Bengal on 31 May 2006 as this species,

a subsequent analysis of the same in ZSI Kolkata museum re-identified it as Great Frigatebird (Maheswaran & Alam 2014).

This note describes sight records of five different Christmas Island Frigatebirds from locations spanning Ankola on the western coast, to Rameswaram on the eastern coast. It is interesting to note that out of the collected sightings, the 'Critically Endangered' Christmas Island Frigatebirds are more numerous than the other two species, which is in contrast with the historical trend. The high number of sightings in the same season indicates that this species may not be as rare as previously considered. The increase in the number of sightings and confirmation of species level identity in recent years can be attributed to higher number of observers in the field, increased accessibility to literature detailing Frigatebird identification, improvements in digital imaging, and ease of wide networking using e-mail, and social media.

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## Notes on breeding of Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis* in Gujarat, India

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**A**shy Prinia *Prinia socialis* is an insectivorous, sparrow-sized member of the Passeriformes. It is widely distributed throughout the Indian Subcontinent, including areas in Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and western Myanmar (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Its altitudinal range is from the mean sea level up to 1500 m in the Himalayas, and up to 2000 m in southern India (Ali 2002). It is a commonly occurring species along forest edges, and in dry open-grasslands, open-woodlands, scrub, urban gardens, and agricultural landscapes. Its small size, distinctive colours, and upright tail make it easily identifiable. The northern populations of the bird have a rufous rump and back, and a distinct breeding and non-breeding plumage while other populations lack such a variation. Its nesting season ranges from March to September, but more commonly starts immediately after the onset of the monsoon.

During the monsoon of 2012, we witnessed some interesting breeding, and nesting, behaviour of the species. We did not find any record of such behaviour of Ashy Prinia in available literature. Our casual, but relevant, observations are presented here.

On 26 June 2012, we found a bird's nest in the lush foliage of RV's office garden, which is situated in the middle of Vadodara city, on the banks of Vishwanmitri River, while some of the overgrown trees were being trimmed

This nest, presumably of a small-sized passerine bird, was unattended, and seemed to have been abandoned by it. It was at a height of about two metres from the ground, in a thick bush of wild figs (*Ficus* sp.). The nest consisted of three large leaves stitched together with fibers and webs, and lined with fine thin fibers, and twigs. Its entrance faced east, was exactly opposite RV's office window [102, 103], and therefore, easy to observe.