

—Short notes—

Sighting of the Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* at Kolleru Wildlife Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh, India

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The Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (BSAP) had organised a three-day camp at Kolleru Lake & Wildlife Sanctuary for the purpose of the Asian Mid-winter Waterfowl Census operations for 2008. The dates of the camp were 25-27 January 2008.

On 26th January, at 0630hrs the team visited an area called Atapaka (16°33'40"N, 81°13'57"E), which is about 5 km from Kaikaluru town (16°33'18"N, 81°13'9"E). This area has recently shot into prominence as the location of a newly forming pelicanry at Kolleru. There are about 400+ Spot-billed Pelicans *Pelecanus philippensis* at this place and they have started to nest on the acacia trees that stand on a small island in the water. During our brief visit we counted 30+ active nests.

While watching the Spot-billed Pelicans, we spotted one bird that was swimming around with the others in the water—and at first glance, appeared a little larger than the Spot-billed Pelicans around it. What stood out however was the colouration of that bird. It was almost completely white—with a hint of black on the wing quills. As the bird was swimming, we could not see the colour of its legs, however, its bill was yellow and the skin around the eyes, pink. Scanning the field guides—it became apparent that the bird was an adult Great White Pelican *P. onocrotalus*.

A little further on, other members of our group raised the alert about a second bird of the same colour. This individual was standing on a small earthen mound and showed more details. Closely observing the bird through telescope and binoculars, it was easy to see its completely white colour, bright yellow bill, pink skin around the eyes and pink legs. All these morphological characteristics clinched its identity as a Great White Pelican.

The description of the Great White Pelican, as given by Ali & Ripley (1987) is, 'Plumage mostly white, tinged with rose colour with a tuft of yellowish feathers on the breast; Primaries and some of the secondaries black; slight crest on the back of the head'.

Of the bird we saw, with the exception of the yellow on the breast (where there was no tuft of feathers but a tinge of buff colour), all other features exactly match to the above given description (Fig. 1). One other factor that further aided us in identification was the fact that it was seen in the immediate vicinity of the Spotbilled Pelicans, so an instant comparison was possible.

Great White Pelicans have been only very sporadically reported from Andhra Pradesh state. According to Ali & Ripley

(1987) they are 'mainly winter visitor[s] to W. Pakistan (Baluchistan, Sind) and N. India from the Punjab to Assam (U.P., Rajasthan, Kutch, Saurashtra, N. Gujarat), Andhra (Visakhapatnam)?, and "Madras" (?)'.

Taher & Pittie (1989) do not list the Great White Pelican from Andhra Pradesh—just the Spot-billed Pelican. Kumar (1980) has reported the sighting of a pair of these birds on the Mir Alam Tank (near Hyderabad), in January 1973 (it was a year of drought).

Forest Department staff posted at Atapaka revealed that they had been seeing four Great White Pelicans in the area for the past few days prior to our visit.

This observation therefore seems to suggest that the Great White Pelican might be an occasional winter visitor to the state of Andhra Pradesh. Only regular annual monitoring of the wetland will reveal whether they are regular visitors.

References

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Fig. 1. Great White Pelican in flight, Atapaka, Andhra Pradesh.