

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* off the north-western coast of India

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Jamalabad, A., 2013. White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* off the north-western coast of India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (5): 128.
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Manuscript received on 11 July 2013.

This note presents the sighting of an adult White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* in the pelagic waters off the north-western coast of India, during a scientific cruise in the northern Arabian Sea.

A solitary White-tailed Tropicbird was sighted on the morning of 18 February 2012, at 16°04'N, 72°16'E, a point 121 km west of the coast of Maharashtra (within Indian territorial waters). The bird was flying continuously at an elevation of c. 10 m over the sea, occasionally flying very low, and apparently making shallow dives or skimming the surface. Due to the great distance (which cannot be determined accurately) from which the observation was made, it was not possible to conclusively determine whether the bird was feeding. The bird was observed for at least three to four minutes, exhibiting the aforementioned behaviour, before it disappeared from view. Photographs of this individual were obtained [131, 132].

A second sighting occurred two days later in approximately the same region when a White-tailed Tropicbird flew directly overhead, but it cannot be determined whether this was the same individual; photographic evidence and exact geolocation information of this second sighting could not be obtained.

Phaethon lepturus is the smallest of the three tropicbirds recorded from Indian Subcontinental waters. The adult of this species is identifiable by its yellow bill [131] and black diagonal bands on the inner upper wing [132], which markedly distinguish it from other members of the genus occurring in the region. The white tail streamers, though not clearly discernible in the photographs, were visible through binoculars (during the first sighting), and the bird's identity was further confirmed when observed at close quarters during the second sighting. This bird is pelagic (unless breeding) and is often briefly attracted to ships (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), as exhibited during the second sighting described above. This species is a known resident on the Maldives archipelago and has been recorded as a visitor to the coasts of India and Sri Lanka (Grimmett *et al.* 1999).

P. lepturus has been recorded on the western coast of India on two previous occasions (Palot 2011; Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). Other records from India include a specimen collected from Ross



131. White-tailed Tropicbird.



132. White-tailed Tropicbird.

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Island, Andamans, and another collected far inland from Cachar, Assam (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). [See also p. 115 in this issue.]

Acknowledgements

I thank Shivakumar B. Haragi and Roshmon Thomas for their invaluable help as spotters and observers, and Jason Mendes for helping to compare notes on the description, behaviour, and distribution. Thanks to Praveen J., and Sabyasachi Patra for sharing additional data and literature for citation. I also express my gratitude to the expedition organisers—the National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research.

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In memoriam
Zafar Futehally
1920 — 2013