First record of Short-tailed Shearwater

**Puffinus tenuirostris** from Bangladesh

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**S**hort-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris* is an abundant, medium-sized, seabird that nests in southern and eastern Australia and spends the non-breeding season (northern summer) in the northern Pacific Ocean (Carboneras 1992). Its appearance is more or less uniformly dark brown, long winged, with a rounded head, slender dark bill, and greyish feet extending in flight beyond a short rounded tail (Grimmett et al. 1999). There are no previous records of the species from Bangladesh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Siddiqui et al. 2008; Grimmett et al. 2011).

This note describes the first sighting of Short-tailed Shearwater for Bangladesh: a captured bird photographed at St. Martin’s Island (20°34´–20°39´N, 92°18´–92°21´E). This is the only sedimentary coralline island of Bangladesh, with coral formations, and is located in the north-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal, c. 9 km south of the Cox’s Bazar–Teknaf Peninsula tip, and c. 8 km west of the north-western coast of Myanmar at the mouth of the Naf River (Thompson & Islam 2009).

On 19 April 2008, while taking a walk with his family along the beach of St. Martin’s Island (the most south-easterly point of Bangladesh) CMR saw a fisherman carrying an unfamiliar bird hanging from a wire suspended from his hand. CMR photographed the bird and asked the fisherman where he got it. The latter replied that while he was out fishing that day (within approximately one kilometre of the island) he had hit the bird with a pole and captured it when it landed on his boat. He also said that many such birds were flying over the boat at the time. Since he did not distinguish it from terns and gulls, it is uncertain if more than one shearwater was actually present in the flock of birds he saw. The fisherman was carrying it home to eat for dinner, and after Reza took five photographs, continued on his way and the bird was presumably consumed.

Later Reza showed the photographs to Samiul Mohsanin, who referred them to EUH, who contacted PMT. While EUH and PMT were sure it was a shearwater species, both lacked adequate field experience of potentially confusing species. PMT therefore circulated photographs to a range of experienced birders and obtained their views. The photographs originally circulated had unbeknown to PMT been “photoshopped” with the wire edited out, leading to speculation about the photographs’ provenance, given the unnatural position of the bird. EUH subsequently obtained the original photographs showing the wire, and the story of how they were obtained. Fortunately, two of the photographs taken at close range show clearly the head of the shearwater [147, 148], while [149] shows the fisherman and context of the record.

The key comments and advice on identification given by experts consulted are summarised here. Killian Mullarney commented, “It is a shearwater and, on first glance, I would guess a Short-tailed.” David James, Mike Carter, and Jeff Davies, all from Australia with extensive experience of the species and potential confusion species in their normal range, clarified the key features...
and kindly confirmed after some debate the identification.

David James (in litt.) summarised the identification features that narrowed it down to Short-tailed or Christmas Shearwater, and supported identification as Short-tailed but lacked experience of Christmas, we quote:

1. The fusion of the nostrils in a single tube without a medial crease, and with a diagonal (not vertical) termination at the front openings is typical of shearwaters and wrong for Bulveria, Pseudobulveria, Pterodroma, and Hydrobatidae.
2. The dark plumage leaves several shearwaters (Short-tailed, Sooty, Heinroths(?), Christmas, Wedge-tailed, and Flesh-footed).
3. The fairly short but delicate and slender bill is typical of Short-tailed (also known as slender-billed) and too gracile for Wedge-tailed and Sooty and Flesh-footed (also the wrong colour for Flesh-footed).
4. Dark pinkish-grey legs and dark nails suits Short-tailed and Sooty (Wedge-tailed has pale nails; Christmas supposedly has uniformly dark grey-black feet; flesh-footed has pale feet).
5. The feet that would clearly trail the rather short tail suit Short-tailed but not Sooty. (Wedge-tailed or Flesh-footed).
6. The dark eye eliminates Heinroths, which has a blue eye.

This left the challenge of determining between Short-tailed and Christmas Shearwaters (the latter being found in the central Pacific Ocean). There was some debate among experts over these two similar species, but with Short-tailed more likely to show a hooded appearance compared with uniform Christmas. Ultimately Jeff Davies (in litt.) made the following analysis: “This is based on a small sample size but four bill profiles of Short-tailed [Shearwater] show the nostril cavity length compared to bill length ratio as 0.62 to 0.65, a selection of three Christmas show the nostril cavity length compared to bill length. It may also be steeper/more abrupt at the opening than Christmas.” Together with the other features discussed above and plumage and leg-foot colour we consider this is sufficient to confirm this bird as Short-tailed Shearwater.

This is the first record of this species for Bangladesh, no previous confirmed or claimed records having been traced when PMT and EUH compiled the latest national bird list published (Siddiqui et al. 2008), and one of only a small number of records from South Asia. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) included it in the species of South Asia on the basis of only two May specimens from Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and Grimmett et al. (2011) relegate it to the appendix of vagrants. However, there have been sight records (summarised on p. 118 of this issue). This record from April is consistent with the May records listed in this summary, coming from the pre-monsoon season—a period when cyclones and storms, quite often, affect the Bangladesh coast. Few people interested in birds visit St. Martin’s Island or other coastal waters of Bangladesh during that period, so it is impossible to say if the species might be anything other than a vagrant to Bangladesh.

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References


Rock Sparrow Petronia petronia: A first record for Ladakh

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The Rock Sparrow Petronia petronia, as its English name suggests, is a bird of rocky terrain, occurring in mountainous and barren regions from the Iberian Peninsula in the west, the Mediterranean region, eastwards across Turkey, Central Asia, Iran, northern Afghanistan to Mongolia and northern China. Several subspecies are recognised, although separation in the field is very difficult, since the differences are largely due to subtle features of plumage tone, based on examination of museum skins (Clement et al. 1993).

In the Indian Subcontinent, Baker (1926) described P. p.