

# Sighting of Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*, and Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* from the Arabian Sea, off Ponnani, Kerala

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The Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris* (Family Procellariidae) is one of the world's most abundant shearwaters, with, approximately, 23 million birds breed on Tasmania, and off the coasts of southern Australia from September to April (BirdLife International 2014). It is a trans-equatorial migrant, wintering north of Japan, near the Aleutian Islands (USA), with some birds moving north of the Bering Strait. Recent studies suggest that a majority of the birds fly north, along the western part of the Pacific Ocean, to the Arctic region, returning southwards over the centre of the ocean. They travel c. 15,000 km in each direction, annually, and they have been known to cover this enormous distance in six weeks!

The Short-tailed Shearwater [24] is uniformly dark brown, with a rounded head, and a short tail. Dark feet project noticeably beyond its tail; a short bill, and darker wing lining is typical of the species. There exists only a single record of this species from India, from West Bengal, in April 2013 (Giri *et al.* 2013), and one from Bangladesh (Thompson *et al.* 2013).



Photo: Sandeep Das

24. Short-tailed Shearwater photographed on 27 April 2014.

This note describes the sighting of a Short-tailed Shearwater, from the Arabian Sea, off the coast of Ponnani, Malappuram District, in Kerala, on 27 April 2014 (10.766°N, 75.798°E). The bird was sighted during a pelagic trip organized by the Kerala Forest Department, under the *Green Partner's Program*, wherein regular birding trips are organized throughout the year. With 15 birders onboard, we travelled c. 12 km westward, into the Arabian Sea. The sea was calm, and the weather, sunny, with little breeze. There were multiple sightings of Flesh-footed Shearwater *A. carneipes* in groups of 15–30 individuals.

While birding, we saw a smallish shearwater flying past our boat [25], and returning to settle on the surface of the water. We approached to about 20 m of the bird, which was briskly pecking in the water, while floating, and occasionally, diving completely underwater. The bird resurfaced after c. 15–20 sec., with nothing visible in its beak. This was a rather an uncommon sight, for none of the numerous Flesh-footed Shearwaters present, ever showed such behavior. We observed the bird for about five minutes, and clicked photographs.



Photo: Praveen ES

25. Short-tailed Shearwater flying past our boat.

The bird's head was rounder than, and it looked, overall, much smaller than the Flesh-footed Shearwaters that were close by, thus enabling easy comparison. Later, when we tried to approach closer, it flew off, circling the boat, flying like a typical shearwater [26], with feet projecting beyond its tail. It was clearly a smaller shearwater, confining our identification options to either the Sooty-, or the Short-tailed Shearwater. The former is considered to be hypothetical in the region (BirdLife International. 2014). Several photos that were clicked, analysed, and 'typical' ones transmitted to Praveen J., and Dipu K., for verifying our identification; which they confirmed. Further to this, David James (VENT tours Sydney); International expert on seabirds identification, and staff editor for *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*), commented

"Yes, short-tailed Shearwater, Pale under wing consistent with a Short-tailed or Sooty type. Note the short bill, trailing toes, dark cap, pale throat, solid dark triangle at base of under wing, dark smudging through pale area of under wing coverts, all typical of short-tailed and not sooty. A classic looking bird (or birds)."

Photos: Praveen ES



26. Short-tailed Shearwater in flight.

Though it is considered to be a vagrant in India, there are reports of regular sightings of these birds off the western coasts of the Malayan peninsula (Giri *et al.* 2013). This sighting from the Arabian Sea, first off the Kerala coast, together with the ones mentioned earlier, suggests that some birds drift off from their normal course of migration, in the western Pacific, to cross the Indian Ocean during their spring migration.

On our return journey we photographed a Wedge-tailed Shearwater *A. pacifica* [27], which had been earlier recorded from the seas off Kannur, in Kerala, in May 2011 (Praveen *et al.* 2013). This is the second photographic record of this species from India.

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27. Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

of these birds. We are grateful to Nameer P. O., College of Forestry, Kerala Agricultural University, for his support, and Social Forestry, Kerala Forest Department, for organising the trip. We wish to thank participants from the College of Forestry, Kerala Agricultural University; Sree Sankaracharya University, Kalady; Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Pookode; and Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi.

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## Buffy Fish Owl *Ketupa ketupu* breeding in Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, India

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On 13 July 2014, at 1030 hrs, Soma Jha [SJ] came across a fish owl (Strigidae) on a nest of twigs in a bare tree, on the edge of Choragazi Channel, close to 'Do Banki' camp in Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India. As the noisy diesel-engine boat approached the bank, the owl got disturbed and took off, but returned to resume its perch as the boat drifted away. The owl was observed for 30 min from a distance of 10–50 m. On 31 July, at 1306 hrs, we revisited the nesting location and made observations for 20 min. An individual owl was in the nest, which was, apparently, an old, raptor's construction, in a dry tree, c. 08–10 m above the water [28]. The nesting tree was on the edge of a mangrove forest overlooking a 70–80 m wide water channel. We estimated that the nest was at least 38–50 cm

deep, as only the head of the owl was visible above its rim. When the boat approached the bank, the owl flew out of the nest and perched on an open tree trunk some 10 m inside the mangrove forest, offering us a clear view of it. As earlier, as soon as the boat drifted away, the owl returned to the nest. It was first seen there on 26 June 2014 (*pers. comm.*, Nityananda Chowkidar). The dry tree, on which the owl was nesting, was identified as a 'Keora' tree *Sonneratia apetala* (*pers. comm.*, Krishnapada Baidya). The returning behaviour to the nest, suggests that the owl was probably incubating. One chick was observed at the nest site, along with an adult, on 26–27 August 2014 (*pers. comm.*, Jainy Kuriakose), and from 31 August to 02 September (*pers. comm.*, Harkirat Sangha).