

# Records of a White-eyed Gull *Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus*, and a Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* from the Karwar coast, Karnataka, India

Abhishek Jamalabad

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Abhishek Jamalabad, 44, Kanara House, Mogul Lane, Mahim, Mumbai 400016, Maharashtra, India. Email: [abhishek.jamalabad@gmail.com](mailto:abhishek.jamalabad@gmail.com).

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This note presents the first known record, from within Indian limits as defined in Praveen *et al.* (2016), of the White-eyed Gull *Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus*, and the second conclusively identified record of the Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*. Both birds were observed in Karwar, Karnataka (western coast of India) on multiple occasions over a period of five days in July 2016.

## Introduction

The White-eyed Gull *Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus* (Temminck, 1825) is a medium-sized gull, similar in appearance, on some counts, to the Sooty Gull *I. hemprichii*, with which it is known to associate near fishing harbours (Burger *et al.* 2016). The known range of this bird is restricted to the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden (Burger *et al.* 2016). Though it has occurred in the Maldives, and listed as a vagrant by Grimmett *et al.* (1999), it is suspected they reached the islands assisted by ships (Praveen *et al.* 2014), on account of which the species is treated as hypothetical for South Asia by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012).

The Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* (Linnaeus, 1758) is a small marsh tern with a wide global distribution. The nominate race is known to breed from southern Scandinavia to southern Spain, eastwards through Europe and Western Asia to Lake Balkash, and Altai; the birds winter mainly on the Atlantic coast of Africa (Gochfeld & Burger 2016). Records of this species, from India, are highly contentious as recounted in Praveen *et al.* (2014), who conclude that the only “exemplarily well-documented, peer-reviewed and readily verifiable” record was the one from Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary (Bhatt *et al.* 2014).

## Observations

A solitary first-summer White-eyed Gull, and an adult Black Tern in breeding plumage, were sighted near Karwar Port on 08 July 2016 at 1550 hrs, and observed until 1625 hrs. The gull was subsequently observed again on 10 July (1448–1645 hrs), 11 July (1525–1700 hrs), and 12 July (1356–1609 hrs). So was the tern, at the same times, except on 10 July. All observations were made from one of two points on a breakwater extending 250 m perpendicular to the shore: 14.81°N, 74.11°E. The photographs that form a vital part of this note were made using DSLR cameras with telephoto lenses. Field-scopes were used for close visual observations in field.

Both species were first spotted perched on the floats of a

fish culture cage, leeward of the breakwater, which shelters the entrance to Karwar Port. They were associating with a mixed-species flock of terns, comprising Greater Crested- *Thalasseus bergii*, Lesser Crested- *T. bengalensis*, Sandwich- *T. sandvicensis*, a few pale- *Sterna* sp., including at least two Common Terns *S. hirundo*, and one immature Bridled- Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, all perched on fish culture cages near the mouth of the harbour.

The gull was seen in flight, at very close quarters, on the first day, when it flew repeatedly along either side of the breakwater, occasionally descending to the water's surface suggesting the typical foraging behaviour of gulls (although feeding was categorically not observed). Each sortie was no more than a few minutes before the bird returned to its perch on/near the fish cages. It also briefly followed a fishing canoe, leaving harbour, on the first day, but quickly returned to its perch, and did not display any further association with fishing activity during following observations. On subsequent visits we saw that the bird was comfortable in the presence of the attendants tending the fish cages. On the fourth day, a Black Kite *Milvus migrans* was seen harassing the perched gull on multiple occasions.

The tern, on the first day, was perched at very close quarters on a Styrofoam float attached to a fishing net, but was observable only from a distance on subsequent visits. It seemed to make longer flights that covered a larger area than the other observable birds, often flying seawards and altogether disappearing from view before returning, several minutes later, to perch on a fish cage, or a float. It often flew for long periods, very close to the water's surface, but no foraging behaviour was observed. No direct interactions of this bird, with other birds or human activities, were observed.

My observations were concluded after the fourth day. Both species were reported absent from the area on 18 July (Jainy Kuriakose, *verbally* on 19 July 2016) and 03 August (Gaurav Patil & Vivian Rane, *verbally* on 03 August); but the gull was sighted and reliably photographed earlier by another party on 24 July (Mangirish Dharwadkar, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 24 July 2016).

## Identification

The White-eyed Gull could be confused with the Sooty Gull, which occurs on the Indian coasts (Praveen *et al.* 2014), including those of Karnataka (Doraiswamy 2015), and Goa (Lainer & Alvares 2013). The key characters used to identify the White-eyed Gull were the long, slender, dark bill (as compared to the shorter,



Shashank Dalvi

14. White-eyed Gull in flight.



Omkar Dharwadkar

15. White-eyed Gull perched on fish cage, showing the long slender bill.



Omkar Dharwadkar

16. White-eyed Gull in flight, showing tail pattern, and long slender bill.

heavier, and distinctly two-toned bill of the Sooty Gull), and the distinctive plumage on the head, neck, and rump [14–16].

The Black Tern was easily picked amongst the other terns, as it was considerably smaller, and much darker than the other birds. In the breeding plumage, which it was in, this species may be confused with its close congener, the White-winged Tern *C. leucopterus*—which it was suspected to be, after the first sighting. Subsequent photographs [17–19] helped identify it as a Black Tern on account of the following characters: the prominent, relatively deep tail fork (shallower in a White-winged Tern), and grey rump, upper tail coverts, and tail (versus white in the breeding White-winged Tern). Additionally, the simultaneous occurrence of two features—white under wing coverts, and an extensively black breast first, then

the extensive black under wing coverts, rather than the reverse” (Neil Cheshire, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 14 July 2016). This clearly meant that a bird with the plumage observed here could not be a White-winged Tern. Owing to the frequent confusion that arises in the identification of the Black Tern, with its potential look-alike species (Praveen *et al.* 2014), multiple opinions were sought, about this bird, before concluding its identity.

## Discussion

As with the White-eyed Gulls from the Maldives, the provenance of this Karwar bird, and its mode of arrival at this locality, remain unknown; particularly as the observations were made near a port. However, since its identification is unequivocal, this record serves as the first documentation of this species for the country.

Bhatt *et al.* (2014) reported sightings of the Black Tern, in non-breeding plumage, from Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, Gujarat in May and June 2014; as aforementioned, Praveen *et al.* (2014) treated that as the first, and hitherto, the only confirmed report from India. The present sighting then, is the second: confirmed, photographed, conclusively identified, and verifiable. It is also the first record, from within Indian limits, of one in breeding



Shashank Dalvi

17. Black Tern showing the forked tail, white underwing coverts, and black front.



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18. Black Tern perched on fish cage.



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19. Black Tern showing grey rump and upper tail coverts.

plumage, though it has occurred in this plumage in the Chagos Islands (Praveen *et al.* 2014).

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**Editor's note:** Pelagic birds are known to follow ships, and as such, they sometimes ride along seafaring vessels to areas where they normally do not occur. While ship-assisted records of land birds are generally disregarded, and classified separately by bird records committees, those involving coastal or pelagic birds are admitted as wild vagrants or stragglers since these birds are free to fly off (unlike land birds). In that respect, we do not consider ship-assisted arrival records an issue for accepting coastal species like the White-eyed Gull - contrary to Rasmussen & Anderton's (2012) treatment of the records from the Maldives. Hence, the species is included in the India checklist, based on this report.

## Sighting of Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* in Telineelapuram Community Reserve, Srikakulam District, Andhra Pradesh

B. Laxmi Narayana, V. Vasudeva Rao, V. Nagulu & A. Baleeshwar Reddy

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B. Laxmi Narayana, All India Network Project on Vertebrate Pest Management, PJTS Agricultural University, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad 500030, Telangana, India. E-mail: [narayana.laxmi8@gmail.com](mailto:narayana.laxmi8@gmail.com) [Corresponding author]

V. Vasudeva Rao, All India Network Project on Vertebrate Pest Management, PJTS Agricultural University, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad 500030, Telangana, India.

V. Nagulu (Rtd. Prof.), Department of Zoology, Osmania University, Hyderabad, 500007, Telangana, India.

A. Baleeshwar Reddy, All India Network Project on Vertebrate Pest Management, PJTS Agricultural University, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad 500030, Telangana, India.

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In this note we wish to report a new site record of the Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* from Telineelapuram (18.57°N, 84.26°E), an Important Bird Area (hereinafter, IBA) in Srikakulam District, Andhra Pradesh, India. The Lesser Adjutant is a Vulnerable species (Birdlife International 2015), and a rare visitor to Andhra Pradesh (Ali 1934b; Luthin 1987). The previous records of this species in erstwhile (undivided) Andhra Pradesh are listed in Table 1, and mapped below (Fig. 1).

We first observed the bird on 25 January 2015 while it was perching on a fig tree (*Ficus sp.*) along with Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala*. Its identification was confirmed with the help of Ali & Ripley (1978), and Grimmett *et al.* (1999). We further monitored the activity of the bird over a period of one

month (25 January–27 February 2015). Every morning (0545 hrs) it flew from its roosting site (a fig tree) to its feeding grounds, mostly in paddy fields, a distance of two kilometers, where it was mostly observed in the afternoons (1200–1600 hrs). The bird was later seen roosting along with Painted Storks late in the evening at around 1800 hrs.

Our sighting adds the Lesser Adjutant to the threatened birds of Telineelapuram IBA. Further information collected from an active, local birder from Telineelapuram village informed us that the bird was seen up to 20 March 2015 (P. Vishweshwara Rao, *verbally* on 11 April 2015). In general the stork was present at the site over a period of 54 days, from 25 January to 20 March 2015. The present record is after a gap of 34 years from the