

Two spring 2017 records of Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris* from Gujarat, with notes on its identification

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On 30 April 2017, while TS and DS were scanning for White-winged Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus* from a boat, with Latif bhai, at Nal Sarovar (22.80°N, 72.05°E), Gujarat, at 1010 hrs, they immediately noticed an all dark bird, flying low, with fluttering wing beats, to their left, and a few seconds ahead of us. Fortunately, DS and TS took two photos [22, 25] while TS recorded a small video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phpnCTh4Gw0>) before it quickly disappeared. We were quite confident that this was a pelagic bird, and suspected it to be a petrel. Next morning, after interactions with experts,

it became clear that this was a shearwater: either a Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*, or a Short-tailed Shearwater *A. tenuirostris*. However, a detailed analysis of the photo clinched its identity as a Short-tailed Shearwater (See below).

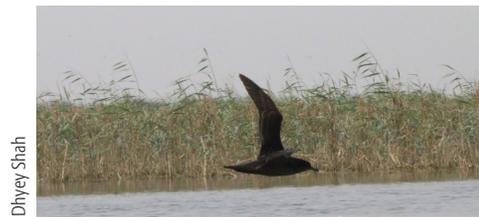
On 20 May 2017, JD, a veterinary doctor, sent a few photos [23, 24] of a dead bird to BB. It looked like a pelagic bird but BB could not identify the species. The bird had been retrieved on that day from

the Mahuva coast (20.05° N, 71.80° E), Bhavnagar District, Gujarat. Despite rescue attempts and treatments, it did not survive. JD did a post mortem, and some plastic material was found in its stomach. BB sought further help from other experts and concluded it as a Short-tailed Shearwater (See below).

The Short-tailed Shearwater is believed to be a vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent. However, six earlier records (Giri *et al.* 2013; Praveen *et al.* 2013; Thompson *et al.* 2013; Praveen *et al.* 2015) are present from the April–May season, indicating a strong tendency for spring vagrancy. The Short-tailed Shearwater is an addition to the birds of Gujarat, as the species is not listed in the recent checklist of the birds of that state (Ganpule 2016).

Acknowledgements

TS and DS would like to thank Latifbhai and Kabaruddin for birding arrangements at Nal Sarovar.



Dhyey Shah

22. Shearwater flying over Nal Sarovar.



Jagdish Desai

23. Shearwater obtained from Mahuva coast.



Jagdish Desai

24. Shearwater obtained from Mahuva coast.



Dhyey Shah

25. Nal Sarovar Shearwater video grab after shifted levels for whites and mid-tones.

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Notes on identification

We took up the challenge of identifying the species, and contacted several experts, worldwide, to confirm the species identity.

Bird 1 – From Nal Sarovar:

The photographs of this bird were of poor quality [XX1, 4], and the video grabs not clear enough, to evaluate the plumage in detail. Hence the identification was far from straightforward. We began by eliminating from our prospective list, “all-dark” shearwaters possible in the region.

- The Wedge-tailed Shearwater *A. pacifica* was ruled out due to the short tail (vs long tapering tail of Wedge-tailed) and prominent head projection with a steep forehead (vs a slimmer head projection with relatively more sloping forehead of Wedge-tailed) of the photographed bird.
- The Flesh-footed Shearwater *A. carneipes* was ruled out due to the slimmer and “all-dark” bill (vs. thicker and bicolored bill of Flesh-footed), steep forehead (less steep in Flesh-footed), and slimmer and elongated wings (vs relatively broader wings of Flesh-footed) of the photographed bird.

So, the remaining possibilities were Sooty-, and Short-tailed-Shearwaters. Separating these two species was tough as there are a lot of similarities between them, and the photographs and videos that we had were of poor quality prohibiting us from checking specific identification features.

At this point, we tried to get expert opinion. Initially, there were differences of opinion regarding the identification, even among them. A few suggested it was a Sooty Shearwater, but given that the quality of photographs, they were not definite about it.

The points that were brought up in favour of Sooty Shearwater were:

- Long flexing wings in flight (rather than rounded wings held stiffly in flight).
- Deeper and slower wing beats (and not clipped as is typical in Short-tailed Shearwater).
- No indication of trailing feet.
- The bill size (few correspondents considered this to be acceptable for a Sooty Shearwater).

The points that came up in favour of Short-tailed Shearwater were:

- The bill size (according to few correspondents this was not long enough for a Sooty and was better fitting a Short-tailed Shearwater).
- Paler area on the throat (or chin), which Sooty usually does not have, but is quite a common feature for Short-tailed.
- Pot-belly and substantial wings. (The pot-belly compares well with other photos of Short-tailed whereas Sooty has a

flatter belly and a more torpedo-shaped body which appears larger when compared with narrower and more pointed wings. This bird has quite long and broad wings compared to body size, suggesting a Short-tailed Shearwater)

- Underwing pattern, appearing overall dark, with no marked contrast between primaries and coverts (A Sooty Shearwater would show marked contrast between darker under-surface of primaries against white region of coverts. Short-tailed has highly reflective under surface to primaries which shows little or no contrast with pale regions of coverts. In addition, Jeff Davies took the video grab into Photoshop and shifted levels for whites and mid-tones to reveal tonal pattern of the under-primary area, and it re-confirmed the typical Short-tailed underwing pattern [XX4])
- Though the flight pattern reminded one of a Sooty, it was suggested that this couldn't be relied upon in an inland lake without significant winds and waves. There was also a mention about personal observations of Short-tailed Shearwaters flying in similar manner in such conditions elsewhere.

After the analysis of re-processed underwing images, and detailed discussions, all experts aligned towards Short-tailed Shearwater and there were no divergent opinions. John Cox additionally suggested that the bird was a juvenile based on noticeable pale fringes to upper primary and lesser wing coverts, with no sign of primary moult. An adult in late April should possess worn plumage (thus no pale fringes) and probably be starting to moult.

Bird 2 – From Mahuva

Identification of this bird was easier due to the greater number of good photographs available for analysis [xx2, 3]. All-dark underparts eliminated most of the shearwaters except Wedge-tailed, Flesh-footed, Sooty, and Short-tailed. The bird had darker underparts (brown) and in the field, would appear almost uniform (ruffled here due to the condition of the bird). The medium-sized “all-dark” bill, and pale bar in the under-primary coverts, eliminated a Flesh-footed Shearwater. The short, rounded tail and underwing pattern eliminated a Wedge-tailed Shearwater. The medium-length bill better fits a Short-tailed Shearwater than it does a Sooty Shearwater. The underwing pattern, from what is visible, is typical of a Short-tailed, rather than a Sooty: secondary coverts have an even-width pale bar, primary coverts are pale and lack any obvious dark shaft streaking. The bases of the primaries also appear slightly pale and do not contrast markedly with the pale primary coverts. Based on these characteristics, this bird was definitely a Short-tailed Shearwater. John Cox also agreed that this bird was a Short-tailed Shearwater, and additionally commented that this could also be a juvenile judging by its fresh pale-fringed scapulars.

Further notes on distinguishing Short-tailed and Sooty Shearwaters: John Cox prepared a detailed analysis clarifying the usefulness of some of the well-documented identification features. The key points that were detailed by him are given below:

White flashes on underwing: A Short-tailed Shearwater could have various shades of grey covering its entire underwing, although, most often there are areas of very pale grey or white, which, unlike on a Sooty, are centred on the secondary coverts and sometimes extend to the outer primary coverts. Thus, Short-tailed usually appears to have a pale, sometimes white, central area on the underwing, whereas Sooty has white areas

centred more towards the wing tip. This feature was crucial in the identification of both the birds here.

Wing and body shape: A Sooty Shearwater has a slightly greater wing-length and wingspan than Short-tailed, although any difference would be undetectable on a flying bird due to dimensional overlap. Total body lengths are also similar, but the greatest differences between them are the body bulk and shape. Sooty is usually the heavier bird, and in flight appears to be much bigger-bodied ratio to wing-length than Short-tailed. Moreover, it usually appears flat-bellied, whereas Short-tailed Shearwater is rounder or pot-bellied. In flight, the larger body of Sooty Shearwater creates the impression of it being a smaller-winged bird than a Short-tailed, which appears to have a more substantial wing area. But this difference is subtle and often depends upon the condition of a bird. For example, individuals may be in moult, starving, have a full crop or bloated intestines that may slightly alter their shape and proportions, or a freeze-frame camera could simply catch them in an unusual position or posture. He also pointed out that the wing shape (round vs pointed wing tips) is not useful as both birds have similar primary formula. Bird 1, above, showed a pot-bellied structure, thus supporting its ID as a Short-tailed Shearwater.

Bill size: Bill size is not a reliable feature of identification if the photographs are not sharp enough (as in the case of Bird 1 here).

Toe projection: The legs and feet of a shearwater are not held straight and trailing in normal flight. In normal flight the legs are usually drawn up and concealed within dense ventral feathers, with all joints bent. The tibia run outwards from the knees to the ankles, from where the tarsi turn inwards and downwards to the toes, which are usually angled in line with the body. Thus, with this zigzag positioning of leg and foot bones, the feet can be instantly drawn further inwards by a twitch of the tendons; probably an adaptation to minimise aerodynamic drag on these very fast-flying birds. Their legs are most often extended when a bird is circling, turning, or coming in to land. In flight, both species may exhibit toes extending beyond the tail-tip, but this feature is not really a valid identification criterion for a single bird because the toes can be retracted at will in both species. However, Short-tailed Shearwaters have a shorter tail and usually do have trailing toe-tips, although even in good light they can be extremely difficult to see. For Bird 1, images are not sharp and the tail (and toes?) appears blurred and uniform black, making it impossible to detect if any toes are trailing.

Flight action and jizz: There are really too many physical, physiological, and environmental variables that can greatly affect the shape of a bird in flight, including its actions and rate of wing-beats, and applying generalisations to a single bird can lead to error. He concluded that, since the bird seen in Nal Sarovar is almost certainly a juvenile, lost and nearing exhaustion, its flight action and jizz may not have been normal.

We would like to thank Charles Anderson, David James, Jeff Davies, John Cox, Neil Cheshire, Oscar Campbell, Rohan Clarke for providing the expert comments and a very fruitful discussion on the identification of these birds. Jeff Davies also helped with re-processing the image to bring out the underwing pattern more clearly. In addition, John Cox also provided a detailed note on identification, which is reproduced here. 📷

— Compiled by **Dipu Karuthedathu, Prasad Ganpule & Praveen J.**

Correspondence

Purple Sunbird *Cinnyris asiaticus* congregating to feed on syrup of pearl millet *Pennisetum glaucum* flour and water, in Jodhpur, Rajasthan

On 12 July 2016, at 0830 hours, Pranjal J. Saikia was driving in Jodhpur city (Rajasthan) when he saw c. 25 Purple Sunbirds *Cinnyris asiaticus* gathered on the footpath of a busy road. All the birds were busy feeding on grain [26] that people had scattered to feed birds, mainly feral Rock Pigeons *Columba livia*. Upon a closer look, he found that the grain comprised of partially ground *bajra* or pearl millet *Pennisetum glaucum*. *Bajra* is popularly fed to seed-eating birds, e.g., Blue Rock Pigeon, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, and other birds associated with human settlements at prominent places in Jodhpur, as elsewhere in India. It was interesting to watch nectarivorous birds feeding on ground-*bajra*. On closer inspection he noticed that rainwater had drenched the ground-*bajra*, creating a syrupy liquid of its flour; the birds were foraging on that syrup with their long tongue.



Pranjal J. Saikia

26. Purple Sunbirds feeding on pearl millet.

While around 25 Purple Sunbirds were feeding on the footpath, there were an equal number in nearby trees, bushes, and on electricity wires—as if waiting for their turn to feed. They were completely oblivious of the people around them. The feeding frenzy continued for more than 20 mins.

Even though arthropods are an important part of the diet of most, if not all sunbirds, their primary source of nutrition is nectar, and over time their beaks have evolved in order to feed on nectar of a variety of different plants. Sunbirds have also been observed feeding, opportunistically, on invertebrates—gleaning them from off leaves and flowers, as well as by sallying like flycatchers (Cheke & Mann 2001). The Purple Sunbird is known to feed on insects, and the juice of grapes (Ali & Ripley 1999). They have also been observed feeding on the sugary syrup exuding from 'jalebis' in Rajasthan (Sangha 2015).

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