

## Letter to the Editor

### A Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii* specimen at the Government Museum, Chennai

I paid a couple of visits to the Government Museum, Chennai (Tamil Nadu, India) to look at the bird specimens collected and preserved there over the years. Out of all the specimens, one labelled 'LARUS HEMPRICHII SOOTY GULL' was of great interest. Till date, all records of this species from the Indian Subcontinent have been sight records (Macker 2012). This seems to be the only specimen collected from the country. The first mention of this particular specimen was by Dewar (1905), who states, 'A specimen of this bird, labelled "Madras," occurs in the local museum' (p. 497); followed by the same being listed in the museum catalogue (Satyamurti 1970). Except for a passing mention in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) of "an old 'Madras' specimen", perhaps treated doubtful, as it is not plotted on the maps, all other regional references have ignored this specimen (Ali & Ripley 1987; Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

This specimen seems to have undergone a lot of chemical treatment as a result of which it looks worn and its feathers have lost their true colours. Thus confirming its identity was a challenge. A metal tag present with the specimen has only its scientific, and English names, 'LARUS HEMPRICHII SOOTY GULL' embossed on it and does not bear a collection date nor the collector's name. Attempts made to locate an entry in the museum register were futile and hence there is no information on how this particular specimen landed in the museum.

I photographed the mounted specimen from all possible angles to make sure all the identification marks were 'captured' for further analysis [147-148]. Mounted specimens of other Larids, next to it, helped in concluding the size of this species even from photographs. No attempt was made to take out the specimen for morphometric measurements due its dilapidated condition and the very real possibility of it disintegrating on being handled.

Visual comparison of the size of this specimen, with the neighbouring mounted specimen of the larger Pallas's Gull *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus* showed this to be one of the smaller gull species, being only half the size of the latter [149]. The Sooty Gull *I. hemprichii* specimen has dark wings, a thick bill, and a larger head/bill ratio, which helped us eliminate Black-headed- *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, Brown-headed- *C. brunnicephalus*, Slender-billed- *C. genei*, and Mew- Gull *Larus canus*. The presence of a white collar, a white trailing edge to the secondary

149. Comparison of mounted specimens of Sooty Gull (bottom left) and Pallas's Gull (top centre) in the Government Museum, Chennai.



feathers, and a faint grey wash forming a band on the breast points towards a Sooty Gull. Experts who viewed the pictures confirmed them to be of a Sooty Gull, based on reddening at the end of the bill, the overall bill shape, and the slit nostril (Mark Smiles, *pers. comm.*, September 2013). Oscar Campbell (*pers. comm.*, September 2013) opined that the depth of the bill in the pictures rules out the possibility of an extra-limital White-eyed Gull *I. leucophthalmus*, which otherwise shares some of the plumage features of a Sooty Gull.

Through this letter, I would like to confirm the existence of a mounted specimen of the Sooty Gull in the collection of the Government Museum at Chennai. It should be treated as a possible first record and the only specimen for India.

### References

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