

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* from Kerala, South India

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On 18 January 2010, a tropicbird (Phaethontidae) was caught at Palavayal (12°31'N, 75°41'E; c. 240 m above MSL) about 84 km NE of Kannur town in northern Kerala. The bird was being mobbed by crows. Though no external injuries were visible, it was in an exhausted condition and was reluctant to fly. In captivity it took sardines *Sardinella* sp., and small anchovies *Anchoviella* sp., and was administered glucose water for quick rejuvenation. By 20 January, it recuperated well and in the evening of the same day it was released at Palavayal. It flew off westwards, towards the sea.

I identified the bird as an immature White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* (Harrison 1996; Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kumar *et al.* 2004). It had predominantly white plumage with black wing tips (Fig. 1). The characteristic wing pattern (the diagonal black bars on the upper wing were faintly visible) and the contrasting black tips of the primaries were diagnostic; black outer primaries were in contrast with the white primary coverts. Tail feathers were complete and each feather had a black spot near the tip. Central white tail streamers were half-grown. Black patches around the eyes were distinct. The upper parts of the body, especially around the nape and back, were barred or mottled. The throat and upper-breast were pure white. Bill was pale yellow with a dark tip and legs were blackish.

There have been only three known instances of this species occurring from mainland India. A pair of birds in flight at Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu on the south-eastern coast of India on 1 April 1989 (Balachandran 1992), a bird caught alive from River Barrak [=Barak] well inland, in Cachar on 9 April 1877 (Hume 1877; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), and a single bird seen by

Lindsay J. McDougall, flying close to the beach at Kovalam, Kerala on 2 March 2006 (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). According to Ali & Ripley (1983), the species breeds in Mascarene, Seychelles, Maldives, Andaman, and Cocos-Keeling Islands.

The present record is the second report of the White-tailed Tropicbird from the west coast. Interestingly, this is yet another instance of the species getting wind-blown far inland. The nearest seacoast is about 50 km away at Ezhimala. The recorded site (Palavayal) is very close to Karnataka state, adjoining the Mundroth range of forests in the Brahmagiri part of southern Western Ghats.

Earlier, the related Red-billed Tropicbird *P. aethereus* was also recorded from Kerala's coast on three occasions: Kollam district in June 1982 (Krishnan 1991), Kozhikode district in November 2003 (Palot 2003), and Kannur district in March 2007 (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). These records show that the tropicbirds, which breed in the oceanic islands of the Indian Ocean, are vagrant visitors to the Kerala coast.

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Fig. 1. Immature White-tailed Tropicbird at Palavayal, January 2010.