

# Some Observations from Lakshadweep and the Laccadive Sea off Kerala

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Having been brought up and lived most of my life within a few kilometres of the coast in England, my time living in Delhi and Bangalore has been disappointingly devoid of coastal or pelagic birding! It was with much excitement therefore that I joined the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) camp in Lakshadweep in February 2008. Whilst this was not particularly a birding visit, instead concentrating on the rich marine life of the archipelago through a combination of snorkelling and diving, I was particularly keen to visit the spectacular tern breeding colonies (Pande *et al.* 2007) and to see whether I could find any interesting pelagic species on the long ship journey across the Laccadive Sea from Kochi, Kerala.

As it was, we were unlucky with strong winds making the ship ride, aboard the MV Amindivi, very unpleasant for most people on board, and the weather played havoc with our schedule when we finally got there. It was not possible to visit Pitti Island (the main nesting colony), we were delayed for three days on the return journey, and we were unable to do much snorkelling or scuba-diving when there, because of the choppy seas.

In seven days based on Kavaratti Island I recorded just 18 species in total. Long periods of sea-watching from the island with a telescope produced very few birds except for a few distant, and usually unidentifiable, terns and noddies. The ship journeys there and back took a total of 59 hours and, considering I spent virtually all of the 35 daylight hours actively watching for birds, there wasn't much to see. My effort did at least produce a couple of notable sightings including Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* and several Pomarine Jaegers *Stercorarius pomarinus*.

## Species notes

The full species list from Lakshadweep (plus some records from offshore Kerala waters just outside Kochi itself and from the ship in Kochi harbour) is below. Lakshadweep records are from Kavaratti unless otherwise indicated. Species indicated with an asterisk were recorded from Lakshadweep. Harrison (1985), Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), and Svensson *et al.* (1999) were all referred for identification aid.

All observations were made between departure from Kochi on 5 February 2008 and return there on 13 February 2008. Lakshadweep observations were between 6 February 2008 and 12 February 2008, both dates inclusive.

Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* \* One possible was seen not far from Bangaram Island on the outbound journey on 6 February 2008 and another very worn bird was photographed between Kavaratti and Agatti on the return journey on 12 February 2008 (Fig. 1). Whilst Bulwer's Petrel *B. bulwerii* was not completely ruled out, this bird had a shorter tail and was a bit bulkier than I would expect Bulwer's to be (not having seen either species before),



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Fig. 4. Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax*, February 2008.

and the pale upperwing band I believe was not as obvious. The photographed bird was clearly in mid moult: the outer two primaries were old whilst the inners were new, and the tail and secondaries were also in the process of being replaced.

Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) consider Jouanin's Petrel to be a "regular visitor off W[est] coast", although there are very few confirmed records from the mainland. Lainer (2004) quotes just one record despite "regular seabird watches", although this was of a passage of 342 birds in just 90 minutes in September 2001. There is just one record from Kerala, of a storm-blown bird found exhausted at Marari beach in July 2009 and presumed this species (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). It seems likely that regular observations from the coast, or offshore, should produce more sightings.

**Western Reef-Egret** *Egretta gularis* Up to 100, in both light and dark plumage morphs, seen at Kochi.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* \* One seen flying over Kavaratti.

**Indian Pond-Heron** *Ardeola grayii* \* Two seen on 7 February 2008.

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* Two in Kochi harbour on 13 February 2008.

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* \* Two seen briefly at the southern end of Kavaratti on 10 February 2008.

**Lesser Sand Plover** *Charadrius mongolus* \* One on 8 February 2008.

**Greater Sand Plover** *C. leschenaultii* \* Two sand plovers only seen distantly on 8 February 2008 were thought to be this species.

**Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* \* One or two on two dates.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* \* One on 8 February 2008.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* \* Up to six daily.



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Fig. 2. An adult Pomarine Jaeger *Stercorarius pomarinus*, February 2008.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* \* Up to eight on 7 February 2008 and 8 February 2008.

**Pomarine Jaeger** *Stercorarius pomarinus* Some very good views of skuas were had within three hours from Kochi on both journeys. More than 50% of the birds seen were identified as Pomarine, and most of the unidentified birds were probably also this species. I confirmed at least 17 on the outbound journey and 29 on the return (Fig 2 & 3).

Birds were seen in a variety of immature and non-breeding plumages, whilst several adults had developed the diagnostic "spoons", or elongated, spoon-shaped, central tail feathers. Several birds were in active primary moult. Otherwise identification was based primarily on structure, with birds appearing relatively heavy-bodied and with long and broad "arms", and with a generally powerful and direct flight lacking the more buoyant movement shown frequently by Parasitic Jaeger *S. parasiticus*. Due to the age and plumage variation I found plumage features themselves not so useful for identification; on most birds the pale-based under primary coverts were not very obvious, so the oft-quoted double white patch as an identification feature was rarely clear. Instead most showed extensively white bases to the primaries and inner secondaries. The vast majority were light morphs, or light/intermediate immatures, with just one or two dark morphs seen. More photographs are available for viewing online (Prince 2011).

The majority of sightings were within a few kilometres of the fishing fleet from Kochi, with birds undoubtedly attracted by the feeding flocks of terns that were congregating there. Birds were seen between about 3 km and 30 km from the coast. Although Sashikumar *et al.* (2011) list just three other sightings from Kerala it should be presumed that Pomarine Jaegers are regular winter visitors in good numbers, and more frequent watches from land should produce further sightings.

**Parasitic Jaeger** *S. parasiticus* One adult was seen on the return journey on 13 February 2008 about 10 km from Kochi, and a very pale immature that was concluded, based on field impression as well as responses to photographs taken, to be probably this species (Fig. 4).

The adult was just seen briefly, although the long, pointed central tail feathers were clearly seen. The immature bird was suspected to be Parasitic on structure: it appeared slimmer and lighter-bodied with a slightly finer bill, thinner-based wings and generally less powerful "jizz." The head and underparts were strikingly pale with just an ill-defined upper breast band/neck collar. There was a little broad barring on the axillaries but a



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Fig. 4. Probable Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, February 2008.

total lack of barring on upper- and under-tail coverts. Whilst the whiteness and coldness of the head and underparts can suggest Long-tailed Jaeger *S. longicaudus*, the under-tail coverts would be expected to show some barring, even taking into account the possible effect of bleaching under the tropical sun. There is no hint of a darker trailing edge to the upperwing, as shown by adult (at least) Long-tailed. Also field views suggested Parasitic or Pomarine based on structure and flight, whereas Long-tailed's lighter flight could have expected to be more obvious. Olsen & Larsen (1997) note the, "tendency for dark bars on underwing and undertail coverts to disappear on very pale Arctic Skuas" which could well be the case for this individual.

Opinion was sought on the identity of this bird via a posting on the Oriental Birding email discussion group, and responses received favoured all three potential species! This really indicates the difficulty of identifying jaegers, immature in particular, based on photos alone and without the benefit of field views. On reflection and taking into account received comments I feel it is most likely a Parasitic Jaeger, probably a 2<sup>nd</sup> winter bird, and at the extreme pale end of plumage variation.

Interestingly whilst Sashikumar *et al.* (2011) lists no other records of this species, Praveen *et al.* (2011 see this issue) recorded several during the pelagic surveys off the Kannur coast, further north in Kerala. Madsen (1988), in his observations from northern Karnataka between September and December, recorded 50 jaegers in total; although most of his observations were unidentified, "all appeared to be Arctic Skuas [Parasitic Jaegers]". It seems unlikely that the relatively short geographical distance between these and my observations could be a factor in the different occurrence of the two species. The timings of the sightings could suggest that Parasitic is seen more regularly on passage whilst Pomarine is more regular as a wintering species, but further observations would be required to test this hypothesis.

**Unidentified jaeger** sp. Nine on the outbound journey and 30 on the return. These were mostly more distant birds: on very few of the better seen birds did I have reasons to suspect that they may not have been Pomarine.

**Heuglin's Gull** *Larus heuglini* A few near Kochi. About five large white-headed gulls seen near Kochi were probably "Steppe Gull" *L. (heuglini) barabensis* (taxonomy dependent).

There are few confirmed records of this form from Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011), probably due to a combination of taxonomic and identification confusion. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) consider *barabensis* to be "common in winter from

Pakistan to at least Goa" although Lainer (2004) treats all "large white-headed gulls" as Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, a taxonomic view now more generally disregarded. At Purathur estuary in Malappuram district, Kerala, on 26 November 2009, there were approximately 1500 large gulls of which 70% were considered to be *barabensis*, and 30% *heuglini* (*pers. obs.*).

**Pallas's Gull** *L. ichthyæetus* One outbound and about five on the return, all near Kochi.

**Brown-headed Gull** *L. brunnicephalus* A few near Kochi.

**Black-headed Gull** *L. ridibundus* Many near Kochi.

**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica* One in Kochi on the outbound journey, and two on the return.

**Lesser Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bengalensis* \* About 150 near Kochi on the outbound journey and 300 during the return; seen on a few occasions in Lakshadweep, with no more than 20 per day.

**Great Crested Tern** *T. bergii* \* One near Kochi on the outbound journey and four on the return; seen on a few occasions in Lakshadweep, with no more than 15 per day.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* About 30 were seen approaching Kochi on the return journey.

**Little Tern** *S. albigrons* About 100 seen at Kochi, not well enough to differentiate conclusively from Saunders's Tern *S. saundersi*.

**Bridled Tern** *S. anaethetus*\* Just one bird seen briefly between Kavaratti and Agatti in a small feeding flock containing Sooty and other terns.

This species is not present in large numbers like Sooty Tern *S. fuscata* (just about 20 birds seen in March 2006 as opposed to more than 15,000 Sooty; Pande *et al.* 2007) so it is not surprising that I did not record more. Noting more recent records from the pelagic surveys (Praveen *et al.* 2011 see this issue), and its known mass migration south in late summer (De Silva 1987), suggests that few would be present at this time of year anyway.

**Sooty Tern** *S. fuscata*\* Just two seen between Agatti and Kavaratti on the outbound journey and about ten on the return.

Sooty Tern is a very common breeder on some islands within the Lakshadweep archipelago (Pande *et al.* 2007). At this time of year birds would have been present at the breeding colonies, so it is somewhat surprising that I did not manage to record more, with the main breeding colony on Pitti Island just 24 km from Kavaratti.

**Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybridus* About 40 at Kochi.

**Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus*\* On the outbound journey seen between Bangaram, Agatti and Kavaratti: about 800 in total including a feeding flock of 300; on the return journey about 150 seen. Just one sighting of 60 from Kavaratti itself (Fig. 5).



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Fig. 5. Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, February 2008.

This species is a common breeder according to Pande *et al.* (2007) so my sightings within the archipelago were to be expected.

**Unidentified tern** *Sterna* sp.\* From Kavaratti about 300 presumably Lesser or Large Crested were seen on one day, otherwise about 50 seen around the islands and a similar number approaching Kochi.

**Blue Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia*\* A small flock of feral birds seen regularly.

**Asian Koel** *Eudynamis scolopacea*\* Fairly common on Kavaratti. Interestingly crows *Corvus* sp. are apparently recent colonisers, and some islands have koels but no crows (Deepak Apte *pers. comm.*), so if this is true one wonders what species they parasitise?

**Asian Palm Swift** *Cypsiurus balasiensis*\* Not seen by me, but one was seen by another observer at Agatti airport.

**Unidentified swift** *Apus* sp.\* One seen battling against the strong winds and blown further out to sea on 8 February 2008 was probably a House Swift *A. affinis*.

**Oriental White-eye** *Zosterops palpebrosus*\* Fairly common and the only small passerine recorded.

**House Crow** *C. splendens* \* Up to 13 seen on Kavaratti.

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