

Pelagic birding off India's western coast: a first person account

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A West-coast Pelagic Birding Trip was held between 2 and 4 April 2011 at Mulki, and Kannur, and what an unforgettable experience it turned out to be! For birders who have never ventured out to sea, any amount of narration falls short of what I experienced: the boat ride, spending a whole day on a trackless vast expanse of open water seeking birds—and to be swamped by them, and the ultimate experience of watching the high drama of skuas harassing terns, unfolding right in front of me— all this would remain etched in my mind forever.

Over 20 birders from Kerala and Karnataka participated in this pelagic bird survey, jointly organised by the Malabar Natural History Society and KeralaBirder at Kannur in northern Kerala, and by the S. A. Hussain Memorial Trust at Mulki coast in southern Karnataka. We hired boats at both the locations and ventured into the sea from 0730 to 1630 hrs.

While you are out on a pelagic birding trip, forget the fishing boats that are around you. You are alone on the vast sea that affords you a 220 degree view, on your left, right, and centre, as you head out into the sea. The open sea is a habitat that we have never been exposed to, and so its bird dynamics are a new experience. You usually see birds moving around in the distance, and in the next few minutes there is one, or a few, passing by your boat; with the bird and the boat moving away from each other, you get such a short time to identify the birds that you see. If you thought that you missed identifying your bird, don't be disappointed. Within a short time there are scores of them wandering around your boat, and within the next hour, you may sail close to a mixed fishing party: lo-and-behold, the birds are all there to see. However, there is a problem: while on a seabird watching trip, you are never on a firm surface, like you are during normal birding on terra firma. The rolling and heaving of the boat, as it rides the waves, makes it impossible for you to have a firm footing or hold your binoculars or your camera steady, not to mention, that the birds are in constant motion—you are heaved up while the boat rides a wave or dipped-down, as it hits a trough. It steadies again and tries to tip over to the other side. As a result, if you are not holding on to something on the boat or seated firm with necessary support: you may even go sailing over-board and may end up giving company to those occasional dolphins that you get to see in the sea. But don't be disheartened; self-preservation will make you learn the ropes of bird-watching on the high seas. Photographing from a rolling boat riding a choppy sea could well be very challenging. Thus, despite missed chances, the open sea springs many surprises and presents you with plenty of opportunities – so much so that, at the end of the day you are an expert at identifying all those that have been off-limits to normal birders: Thus, the open sea is one of the last frontiers of bird-watching.

Out on this pelagic environment, the birds are constantly

seeking food resources. There are two common sources: one, the fishing boats that use drag-nets, which, as they plough through the waters, churn-up animalcules from the depths on to the surface and you see seabirds foraging in the wake of the boats: gliding and circling effortlessly around them, swooping-down from time to time to pick-up scraps from the water. Sometimes they settle momentarily to gobble down a morsel before catching up with the ship again by seemingly leisurely wing-beats. The second source: shoals of fish. When the birds discover a moving shoal of fish, there are a few birds initially, but within minutes, call it local enchantment, their numbers swell by the second, as the frenzied feeding sends out visual signals far and wide, across the vast open sea, and you see birds arriving in earnest to partake the bounty offered by the sea around you. This is similar to the mixed hunting parties that you come across in the dense wet forests. There are Bridled- and Common- Terns, Greater- and Lesser-crested Terns, shearwaters, and skuas. This only seems to indicate that, thanks to their acute vision, pelagic birds appear to keep an eye on other birds around, are familiar with their behaviour when they come across fish, and rapidly advance miles across the open sea to join-up mixed-fishing flocks. Flocks pursue the shoals of fish, with birds diving from above amidst waves and scooping them up from the surface. The fish are quickly swallowed, head first by manoeuvring it expertly in mid-air, and in a few seconds the bird wheels around to resume its slaughter of the shoal.

In this melee of frenzied feeding, each species has its own feeding technique: Bridled Terns, which are usually found in scattered ones and twos or in small parties, sometimes in large gatherings of 50–100, pick up fish, usually from the surface. Common Terns do not hesitate to plunge into water. Shearwaters, which usually maintain a more close knit group swimming the churning waters – dipping their heads to pick-up fish, often you will see one of these birds patter along the surface of water with its booty to distance itself from the boat, which you have ordered to steer closer for a better look.

The congregation gets more interesting with the arrival of skuas! Skuas are thugs on wings, wreaking a trail of violence across the open seas that they frequent! You rarely see these skuas feeding on their own, as they are given to a life of piracy, call it 'avian goondaism,' harassing helpless terns, be they Common-, Lesser-, or Great-crested, that have hunted a fish –chasing them down relentlessly, showing great agility in pursuit—matching the tern's every move—turning and twisting with them in tandem and at the end of it all, hounding them to give-up any fish held in their beaks or even disgorge the contents of their stomachs, swallowed only a few seconds back, in a bid to escape from the skua. No sooner is the fish voided by the tern, the skua expertly rolls on its wings to catch it a few feet below the departing tern, well before the fish hits the rolling waves below. This drama unfolds right in front

of you, a few meters from your boat, while you stand and watch every move the skua makes and you are stunned by the ways of this tyrannical bully of the high seas. These Parasitic Skuas (also called as Arctic Skua or Parasitic Jaeger), never fail to impress you with their strength and forceful presence and you find that they are unparalleled in their speed and agility in the air, the traits that make them so successful at harrying terns, forcing them to drop the food they are carrying as they race over the sea (Figs. 1–3).



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

In the morning, birds are on the wing, constantly scanning the surface of waters for food, but in the afternoon, most birds seem to settle down on the water, in twos or in small congregations that may swell to considerable numbers.

One of the most significant aspects of the terns that you would not fail to notice is their predilection to sit on floating debris and riding buoyantly on the wave crests - getting hidden now and again behind the swell (Fig. 4). Often you wonder at their ability to sit on small debris, be it a piece of wood, a chunk of thermocole, or an up-turned sole of discarded footwear, and as we observed, even a discarded tube light! You are amazed at the effortless ease with which these birds ride these pieces of debris: dipping into a trough, riding the crest, never flinching for even a second with the fear of losing balance, appearing as if they are an extension of the debris itself. What is more, they even engage in a copious bout of preening as the debris carries them away from you.

Besides the wonderful birding opportunity that this trip provided, it was also a great meeting ground for birders, some of those who were mere names, I could now put faces to them and shake hands. I had the privilege of meeting some of those whom I had known for well over two decades.

Fig. 4. Greater Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* on thermocole debris.