

Seabird observations off the western coast of India

Anuj Gandhe

Gandhe, A., 2014. Seabird observations off the western coast of India. *Indian BIRDS* 9 (5): 137–138.

Anuj Gandhe, D-906, Panchavati, Pune, Maharashtra, India. Email: anujgandhe@yahoo.co.in

Manuscript received on 09 June 2014.

Historically, the oceans have been one of the least explored avian eco-systems in India. Until recent times, what little we knew of our seabirds, was based on records of birds blown ashore by monsoon winds, observations made during a few expeditions to the islands, and observations made from ships at sea (Praveen 2013). However, most observations from the merchant navy vessels from the Indian seas were made prior to 2000 or perhaps even a couple of decades earlier as reflected in the online database of Royal Naval Bird watching Society (RNBWS; www.rnbws.org.uk). Though there have been significant advances in our knowledge of seabirds in the last three years through sustained off-shore boat trips (Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Praveen 2013), paucity of information from slightly deeper waters (c. 50–200 km) prompted me to write about my experiences on board *Gulf Cobalt*, an oil tanker, where I worked as Chief Officer and spend five months at sea from November 2013 to April 2014. Most of the seabird observations I managed to document below add to our existing knowledge of seabirds.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*

While on a voyage from Sikka, Gujarat, to Singapore, we were about 40 km from Goa (15°25'N, 73°33'E) on 13 December 2013, when an adult Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* joined us and perched on the ship's stern light. Identification was fairly straightforward, as I have seen all three boobies previously during my voyages from western coast of India. Incidentally, an adult Brown Booby *S. leucogaster* was also around at this point but it soon disappeared. After taking photographs [156], I reconfirmed the identification using Grimmett *et al.* (1999) and it was quite interesting to note that the bird shared the bunk with an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* for almost two days. This raptor-booby pair sailed with us almost till Kochi (10°10'N, 75°60'E) in Kerala till we moved closer to the coast on 15 December

2013. The booby was repeatedly seen diving after flying fish, which abound in the waters off India's western coast. As the ship cruised forward, the wash it created was a perfect setting for the flying fish, which in turn were an easy catch for the booby. Though the dive of the booby is a spectacular sight, it is very difficult to capture the moment on camera as the bird plunges at tremendous speed.

Red-footed Booby is documented as the rarest of the three boobies from the Indian Subcontinent with just one prior confirmed record of a dead bird from West Bengal (Karmakar *et al.* 2011). All historical records from the Bay of Bengal are considered suspect (Praveen *et al.* 2013). Hence, interestingly, this would be the first confirmed record of a live bird in the field for the Indian Subcontinent though I myself have observed this species a few times from the western coast, and rarely south of Sri Lanka. Record-wise, this can be treated as a first record for Goa, Karnataka, and Kerala as the ship's course was within 200 nautical miles from the western coast of all these states.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

A single adult Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* was photographed [157] 80 km off the Goa coast (15°14' N 73°32'E) on 05 February 2014. Though Praveen (2013) & Karuthedathu *et al.* (2013) indicate that the Masked Booby *S. dactylatra* is the commonest of this genus on the western coast of India, I personally have more than ten observations of the former and this accounts for more than my Masked Booby sightings – I must say here that I am aware of the juvenile plumages of Masked Booby and have ensured that no identification issues have arisen due to this. This appears to be the seventh Indian record of this species (Praveen *et al.* 2013), the second record for Goa (Lainer 2004), and for documentation purposes, I have ignored my undated sightings seen during my earlier voyages.

Photos: Anuj Gandhe



156. Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*.



157. Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*.

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*

Contrary to other studies from India (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011; Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Praveen 2013), I found this species rarer than the Brown Booby. However, my observation of this species has generally been of multiple birds, and in terms of sheer numbers, I might have seen more of these than the Brown Booby. Observation details and counts were not recorded meticulously to be entirely sure of this statement and these impressions are from my memory. The only photograph I have is of an adult bird taking off [158] from about 70 km (15°14'N, 73°20'E) off the coast of Goa. Compared to studies from India, De Silva (2011) indicates that Brown Booby is more regular along the coasts of Sri Lanka, perhaps even more regular than the Masked Booby, as sightings of the latter appear to be meagre near Sri Lanka.



158. Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*.

?Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*

On 11 December 2013, a single *Fregata* species was photographed [159] from the ship at a point c. 100 km (12°48'N, 73°51'E) west-southwest of Mangalore. The harsh lighting and the distance do not allow for conclusive identification. The all-dark body tilts the identification heavily towards an adult male *F. minor* with the prime assumption that any white body parts (of *F. ariel*) should have stood out in the photograph even in this light. Interestingly, all the frigatebird records from the south-western coast have been during the monsoon months (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011; Praveen J., *pers. comm.*, May 2014) and this would be the first winter record of either species from the south-western coast of India. It is also noteworthy that in the offshore studies of Karuthedathu *et al.* (2013), and Praveen (2013), they have not come across this species at all; presumably the greater distance from the coast, of our ship, enabled us to spot this species.

159. ?Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*.



Photos: Anuj Gandhe

160. Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*

On 20 December 2013, a single sub-adult Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* was photographed [160] 50 km from the coast of Kachchh (22°38'N, 68°28'E) while on a voyage towards the Middle East. Identification was tricky from the photograph, the heavy orangish bill with dark cutting edge, all dark outer primaries, and black mottling on the rump (at this age) enabled separation from White-tailed- *P. lepturus*, and Red-tailed- *P. rubricauda* Tropicbirds. Red-billed Tropicbirds breed on the islands of Arabia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and the sighting of a sub-adult bird is quite likely in Gujarat. However, there appears to be just one prior record of this species from Gujarat, which is of three to four birds seen by Captain E. A. Butler between 'Kutch' and Karachi in March 1877 (Gibson-Hill 1950). However, Gibson-Hill (1950) errs in the location he quotes from Butler (1877) as all of Butler's sightings were between Karachi and Oman. Hence, this appears to be the first 'real' record for Gujarat.

In summary, my observations indicate that exploring deeper waters (50–200 km) may probably be needed to understand the abundance of certain species that may be rare in offshore waters closer to the mainland (<50 km). This is was the first time I managed to take photographic equipment out to sea. I hope to add more records of seabirds off the coast of India in the future.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all my friends and family for their support during my long sailings, which gives me an opportunity to observe the birds far away from land.

References

- Butler, E. A., 1877. Astola, a summer cruise in the Gulf of Oman. *Stray Feathers* 5: 283–304.
- De Silva, R. I., 2011. Observing oceanic birds in Sri Lanka. *Indian BIRDS* 7 (3): 58–62.
- Gibson-Hill, C. A., 1950. The Tropic-birds occurring in the Indian Ocean and adjacent seas. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 49 (1): 67–80.
- Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C., & Inskipp, T., 1999. *Pocket guide to the birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. 1–384.
- Karmakar, S., Ghosh, S., Bhadra, A., & Sen, S., 2011. Birds of India: Red-footed Booby – a rare vagrant 2011. [Website: <http://www.kolkatabirds.com/redfootedbooby.htm>; Accessed on 16 May 2014.]
- Karuthedathu, D., Praveen J., & Palot, M. J., 2013. Recent trends in marine bird monitoring in India. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 109 (1&2): 53–59 (2012).
- Lainer, H., 2004. *Birds of Goa. A reference book*. Mapusa, Goa: The Goa Foundation. Pp. i–ii, 1–244.
- Praveen J., 2013. Oceanic birds of South India—an update. *Sea Swallow* 62: 87–91.
- Praveen J., Jayapal, R., & Pittie, A., 2013. Notes on Indian rarities—1: Seabirds. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (5): 113–125.
- Rasmussen, P. C., & Anderton, J. C., 2012. *Birds of South Asia: the Ripley guide*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C. and Barcelona: Smithsonian Institution and Lynx Edicions. 2 vols. Pp. 1–378, 1–683.
- Sashikumar, C., Praveen J., Palot, M. J., & Nameer, P. O., 2011. *Birds of Kerala: status and distribution*. 1st ed. Kottayam, Kerala: DC Books. Pp. 1–835.