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– Ronith Urs

National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, Karnataka, India. Email: ronithcurs@gmail.com

The Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* from the south-western coasts of South Asia in Sri Lanka and India in 2024

The Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* is a trans-continental migrant with the longest ever recorded migration amongst birds (Hatch et al. 2020). However, the species is very rare in the Indian Ocean compared to the Atlantic and the Pacific, the last two being meridional, connecting the poles (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen et al. 2014; eBird 2024). However, the year 2024 was rather unusual as three separate sightings of Arctic Terns were recorded from Sri Lanka and Kerala. We report the details of each of these sightings and discusses these finds.

Morawala beach, Sri Lanka

On 28 July 2024, at 0749 h, DMJ and MEJ were sea-watching at Gary's point (7.205°N, 79.818°E), Morawala Beach on the western coast of Sri Lanka when DMJ noticed a small *Sterna* tern feeding and moving south along with Bridled- *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Sooty- *O. fuscatus*, and Great Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii* [136]. It had a very evident white rump [137]. Structure and flight pattern were noticed to be slightly different from a Common Tern *S. hirundo*. Hence, DMJ suspected the possibility of this being an Arctic tern (vs a Roseate Tern *S. dougallii* where the rump doesn't contrast strongly with upperparts) and took some images and a video clip. While making their way back from Morawala, DMJ looked at those images and identified it as an Arctic Tern based on small round head, short red bill, and narrow dark trailing edge on underwing.

Images were sent to Moditha Hiranya Kodikara Arachchi and Gary Allport who confirmed our identification. Photographs were posted in Facebook triggering other birders in South Asia about the possible presence of Arctic Terns in Arabian Sea.



Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake

136. Arctic Tern following a mixed tern flock with a juvenile Sooty Tern (first bird), Great Crested Tern, and two Bridled Terns.



137. Arctic Tern in adult breeding plumage showing full dark cap, small rounded head, short red bill, white trailing edge to secondaries, and a clean white rump.



Both: Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake

138. Arctic Tern showing narrow dark trailing edge to upper primaries.

Mappila Bay, Kannur, Kerala, India

On 31 July 2024, at around 1540 h, NE was sea-watching at Mappila Bay (11.854°N, 75.376°E), Kannur District, Kerala on a windy day with heavy rains. He observed a group of terns that he had also spotted in the morning when rains had prevented him from taking pictures. The group primarily consisted of Common Terns, Bridled Terns, and crested terns *Thalasseus sp.* apart from five Lesser Noddies *Anous tenuirostris*. Focusing on photographing Common Terns, he suspected the presence of other species, including Roseate Terns and White-cheeked Terns *S. repressa*. Given the Arctic Tern sighting from Sri Lanka, he also considered the possibility of their presence along the Kerala coast. Amidst the Common Terns, he captured images of a tern that appeared a bit smaller from others. The bird was flying from southeast to north, c.50 m offshore and at 15–20 m above sea surface.

The photographs showed a Common-like Tern with grey back, white rump and long white tail streamers with a white front and dark hood [139–141]. However, the bill was decidedly shorter than any Common Tern [139], all the secondaries on the right wing had a white trailing edge (left wing secondaries were moulting), primaries showed translucence, darkish carpal bar, and sharply defined dark tips to primaries were visible in both upper and under side [150, 141]. Considering the time of the year, such a plumage is most likely of a young bird, probably a second-calendar-year. A couple of days later, expert ornithologists in Western Palearctic and Australia, consulted by Praveen J,

examined his photos and confirmed the identification of the suspicious bird as an Arctic Tern.



139. Arctic Tern showing short neck, moulting secondaries, and translucent primaries.



140. Arctic Tern showing the primaries with well-defined black tips on both upper and under side.



141. Arctic Tern showing grey upperparts, white rump, white edge to upper secondaries, and a darkish carpal bar.

Ali: Nishad Eshaal

Azhikkal Estuary, Kannur, Kerala, India

On 17 July 2024, at 0645 h, AN visited Azhikkal Estuary (11.941°N, 75.294°E), where Valapattanam River empties into the Arabian Sea just north of the Azheekkode village in Kannur District, Kerala. The sky was overcast, with dark clouds and occasionally bursts of heavy torrents. Due to the rough sea and strong winds, he was unable to reach the end of the sea wall from where he could get an unobstructed view of the sea. Heavy fog further reduced the visibility. However, in this adverse weather, he could see a few Lesser Crested Terns *T. bengalensis*, Great Crested Terns, two Common Terns and a lone Gull billed Tern *G. nilotica*. The terns were flying from north to south. A large flock of Brahminy Kites *Haliastur indus* wheeled and soared above the waves, occasionally picking scraps of food from the

surf. At about 0800 h, he observed a tern at a distance engaged in plunge-diving. Initial impression was a Common Tern and he managed to capture some flight shots.

On a later date, when he examined the photos, it appeared to be quite different from Common Tern. The bird was in a heavily worn plumage making it look as if in moult. Unlike Common Tern, it had shorter neck [142] and thinner black bill giving a 'neckless' appearance [143]. It lacked the dark wedge on the upper wing [144], a diagnostic feature of Common Tern, while it had a sharply defined trailing edge [9, 10] to the primaries. Bill appeared black in all photographs. Rump was white but it had long tail streamers [144]. One of the photos also showed the characteristic translucent primaries [145].



142. Arctic Tern showing grey back, full black cap, and slightly longer bill than what is typical for this species.



143. Arctic Tern giving the 'neckless' appearance.



144. Arctic Tern showing dark tip primaries, white edge to secondaries, and white rump.



145. Arctic Tern showing grey wings, dark tips of upper primaries and some translucence in the primaries.

Ali: Aislin Noyakkam

The photos were uploaded in a Facebook group dedicated to bird identification where tern experts including Killian Mullarney suggested an Arctic Tern, most likely an adult (vs third-calendar-year) based on the full black cap. Though the bill appears longer than the previous two individuals, it still falls within the known variation of Arctic Tern. Photographs not being sharp evoked some concern on the identification but multiple features on this individual favoured an Arctic Tern over Common Tern. Though this bird was identified later, it is chronologically the first for the season from South Asia.

Discussion

The only well-documented South Asian record of Arctic Tern for a very long time was of an adult male in breeding plumage collected (NHMUK#1949.Whi.1.17133) by B. B. Osmaston from Rangdum [=Rungdum] plains of Suru valley, Ladakh, far inland, on 02 July 1928 (Whistler 1936) [146]. While field identification of Arctic Terns is difficult considering the Common Terns that linger in the Arabian Sea in July, good photographs of most individuals are identifiable to species-level. Field identification of Arctic Terns purely based on translucence in primaries can be tricky in tropical seas due to unusually worn Common Terns that bleach their plumage in tropic sun. Hence, head structure and dark tips to primaries are more useful pointers for an Arctic Tern in India. The lack of prior photographs from anybody in South Asia would indicate that the species may have been genuinely rare and 2024 may have been anomalous, at least considering in the last decade. Alternatively, more Arctic Terns may be lying unidentified in the vast number of Common Tern photographs taken in the past decade by South Asian birders. The plumages of the birds indicate three different individuals, and in fact different from the birds seen from Mumbai (see elsewhere in this issue). In fact, the sixth national record for UAE, also the first on the coasts of Arabian gulf, was of a second-calendar-year Arctic Tern reported this year on 12 August (Campbell 2024), the date matching the general season as ours. There are two other Asian inland records of Arctic Terns in 2024, in eBird, one from central Russia in April (Coe 2024) and another from Mongolia in May (Batkhuu 2024), which support the hypothesis that 2024 may have been anomalous. The number of records in the coasts of Indian Ocean, including the historical record from Ladakh, might also indicate an overland movement of a small population of these birds, perhaps at great heights, and might have been gone unnoticed. These might belong to the northern Asian population of this circumpolar breeder.

Praveen J. (Image used with permission by NHMUK, London)



146. Arctic Tern specimen (NHMUK#1949.Whi.1.17133) from Ladakh preserved at the Natural History Museum, London.

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- Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake, Nishad Eshaal, Afsar Nayakkan & Sondapperuna Arachchige Don Malika Eranga Jayathilake
Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake, 16B Kurunduwatta, Mahabage, Ragama, 11010, Sri Lanka. Email: dinidujayathilake@gmail.com [DMJ]
Nishad Eshaal, Semiyas, Edacheri, Pallikunnu post, Kannur, Kerala, India. Email: nishadeshaal25@gmail.com [NE]
Afsar Nayakkan, Afsar Manzil, Keeriyad, Chirakkal post, Kannur. Email: abunayakkan@gmail.com
Sondapperuna Arachchige Don Malika Eranga Jayathilake, 16B, Kurunduwatta, Mahabage, Ragama, 11010, Sri Lanka. Email: mjayathilake@yahoo.com [Corresponding author] [MEJ]

Occurrence of Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* in Mumbai

Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* are long distance fliers migrating every year from the Arctic to the Antarctica and back; they cover more than 40,000 kilometers every year following the summer sun. They usually leave their breeding grounds in mid-July and reach Antarctica in November, meandering their way, following wind currents and food availability, sometimes taking several months to reach Antarctica. However, they normally take a more direct route in mid-March back to the Arctic through the Pacific or Atlantic (Alerstam et al. 2019; Hatch et al. 2020).

During the monsoon months of July, August, and September of 2024, we had deluge of pelagic birds in Mumbai coasts including Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Lesser Noddy *A. tenuirostris*, Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*, Christmas Island Frigatebird *F. andrewsi*, Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*, Wilson's Storm-Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Hydrobates monorhis*, Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Long-tailed Jaeger *S. longicaudus*, Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Sooty Tern *O. fuscatus*, Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi*, and White-cheeked Tern *S. repressa* (<https://ebird.org/region/IN-MH-MC/bird-list?yr=cur>). The stormy weather over the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean possibly contributed to this.

On 06 August 2024, fourteen of us made a trip by ferry to Elephanta Island from Gateway of India, Mumbai. On the way, a frigatebird was seen gliding, a Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis* flew by swiftly; several Bridled Terns, swarms of Common Terns *S. hirundo*, and a few Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* were flying, fishing, and perched on buoys and boat anchor cables. On reaching the jetty, a couple of Lesser