Correspondence

The Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma* from Sri Lanka

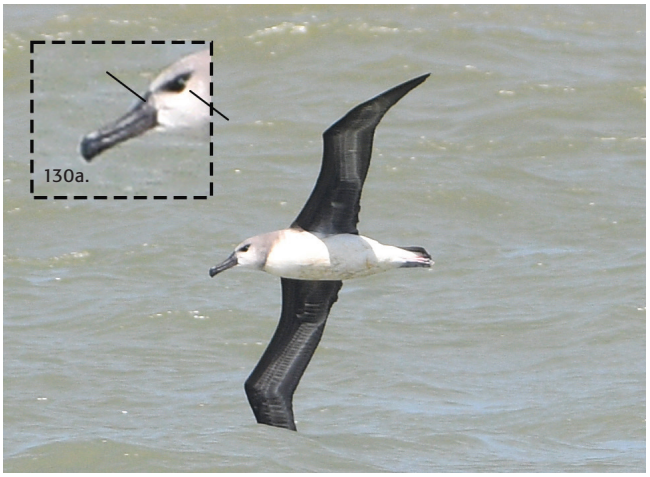
The Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma* is a Southern Ocean albatross belonging to the 'Mollymawk' group. It is known to breed on remote Southern Ocean islands and through recoveries and satellite tagged birds it has been identified to disperse circumpolar throughout the Southern Ocean extending mainly within 65°S and 35°S. The northern most of its range is in the zone of Humboldt Current, where birds have been noted to reach north up to 15°S; however, there are no confirmed records of it from the northern hemisphere (Carboneras et al. 2020; Harrison et al. 2021).

On 22 July 2024 at 0540 h, LW was starting a sea-watch from Olaithoduvai fishing village (9.020°N, 74.833°E), when suddenly he noted a large bird approaching from the south-east, flying parallel to the beach. The bird was ***c.***200 m off the beach and was flying in low arcs with stiff wing beats in-between. At the time, the light conditions were poor, but, LW managed to get some photographs of the bird after observing it through the binoculars, and was stunned with excitement as he realized that this is a juvenile albatross!

The photos were quickly shared with MK for further identification, and with a quick literature review it was preliminary identified as a juvenile Grey-headed Albatross. The exciting news was passed back to LW and he kept watching the coast anticipating the bird might return. The effort was not futile, at around 1030 h, he saw the bird flying from the same direction, flying parallel to the beach. Somehow it had flown back undetected and had returned the same way. LW was able to photograph the bird again **[129–131]**, with better light and at a closer range of *c.*50m from the beach. The bird circled in-front of the observation point a few times, before turning back and flying past. It then moved gradually towards south, towards the open sea, not to be seen again.

All: Lahiru Walpita

129. Grey-headed Albatross at Mannar, Sri Lanka.



130. Grey-headed Albatross showing characteristic bill shape, membranous naricorn[1] and the pale crescent behind eye (130a)

131. Grey-headed Albatross showing pale upper edge of the culminicorn[1], Mannar, Sri Lanka

The bird had a pale grey head with a faint tinge of brown **[129–130]**. The grey was palest by the chin, darkening towards lower throat ending with a narrow dark lower throat margin, in the form of a collar, separating the whitish upper breast. The ear coverts, neck sides and crown were more or less uniform brownish-grey with very inconspicuous, fine, pale mottling. Rest of the upperparts except the white rump, were dark brown, darkening almost to black towards the wing tips. Hind-neck was slightly paler and warmer brown. Underwings were dark, with a blackish leading edge and the rest was ashy with a diffused pale panel formed along the mid-wing with the whitish fringes of the underwing coverts. Rest of the underparts was mostly white, tinged buff (possibly discoloured or stained) towards belly and vent. Undertail was dark with white undertail. Feet were pinkish. The bill was all dark, with a pale culminicorn **[131]**. Eyes were dark, surrounded by a black eye patch. The unmoulted primaries and overall uniform wings suggest this bird to be a first cycle bird fledged after the last austral summer (Haass 2014; Carboneras et al. 2020). The combination of dark underwing and grey head with the dark bill narrow down the identification to either Grey-headed Albatross or Black-browed albatross *T. melanophris* (Harrison et al. 2021). We did not consider the 'grey head' as a diagnostic feature for Grey-headed Albatross since some similar aged Black-browed Albatross's also show grey on head in varying

1 Birds of order Procellariiformes which includes albatrosses, petrels, shearwaters, and storm petrels have compound bills consisting of several joined plates. The naricorn is one such segment which covers the nostril in the form of a sheath. Culminicorn is the plate that covers the majority of the culmen from the forehead up to the maxillary unguis; the hooked tip of the upper mandible.

amounts, generally causing confusion, and potentially leading to misidentifications (Haass 2014; Callaghan 2018; Thomas 2023; Hollstein 2024; Rojas 2024). These two species are a highly confusing Mollymawk species pair at this age showing much overlap in plumage characteristics (Haass 2014), therefore we looked in to fine plumage and other characteristics of this bird to confirm its identification. Bill structure was of greater use in identification rather than overall bill colour since both species show overlaps in bill color variations, therefore not diagnostic (Haass 2014, 20; Carboneras et al. 2020). The bill shows a narrower culminicorn resulting in a pinched structure to the bill, and the naricorn appears to extending membranous up to the feathered face from the nostril **[131]**. This bill structure is shown by Grey-headed Albatross, rather than Black-browed, which shows a more elevated and uniformly formed culminicorn lacking the membranous naricorn (Haass 2014). In addition, there seems to be no pale halo in-between the maxillary unguis and the culminicorn, and also some photographs clearly show the upper edge of the culminicorn to be pale **[131]**, a diagnostic feature of first cycle Grey-headed Albatross, when present (Haass 2014). Additionally, photographs show an inconspicuous pale crescent behind the eye **[131]**, another characteristic of the Grey-headed Albatross (Haass 2014). Structurally, the bird also appears stout with a thicker neck than a typical Black-browed again favoring Grey-headed (Haass 2014; Harrison et al. 2021).

The occurrence of this species at this latitude is quite remarkable and shows to how much of an extent vagrancy could take place. This is probably the first report of this species in the Northern Hemisphere. Interestingly, the only other albatross reported from the Indian Subcontinent, a beached Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebetria palpebrate*, was recovered in September 2022 from Anthoniyapuram beach, Rameswaram Island, Tamil Nadu, India, approximately 38 nautical miles (70 km) from this location, over the other side of the Palk Strait (Byju & Raveendran 2022).

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Identification of the *Phylloscopus burkii* complex in India and notes on the occurrence of Bianchi's Warbler *Phylloscopus valentini* in Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh

The *Phylloscopus burkii* complex of 'Golden-spectacled' warblers from the mountains of Southern and Southeastern Asia is a group of at least six sympatric sister species – Grey-crowned Warbler *P. tephrocephalus*, Martens's Warbler *P. omeiensis*, Alström's Warbler *P. soror*, Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini*, Green-crowned Warbler *P. burkii*, and Whistler's Warbler *P. whistleri*. The group consists of sibling species with complex evolutionary histories resulting in elevational segregation of distinct forms at different altitudes throughout the mountains of Asia. Extreme similarities in plumage, habitat preference, and behaviour make field identification of members of this complex challenging (Opaev & Kolesnikova 2019) and presents a classic case of cryptic speciation because members of the complex differ more in vocalizations and DNA sequences than plumage (Alström & Olsson 1999). Of the six warblers in the complex, three have been well-documented in India (Grey-crowned, Green-crowned, and Whistler's), while there have been no confirmed records of Alström's, Martens's, or Bianchi's Warblers (Praveen & Jayapal 2024). I present evidence for the occurrence of a fourth member of the complex in India, Bianchi's Warbler, with additional notes on identifying Alström's and Martens's Warblers, which may also occur in parts of Northeast India.

Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini* is a polytypic species with two currently recognized subspecies: *P. v. valentini* in central and southern China, parts of northern Myanmar and Southeast Asia; *P. v. latouchei* in southern and south-eastern China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Alström 2020a). It is the largest member of this complex and breeds on the highest mountain slopes among all members of the complex (Martens et al. 2003; Alström 2020a).

Based on past evidence, the presence of Bianchi's Warbler in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, India has been uncertain due to its co-occurrence with a number of its congeners such as the nominate and *nemoralis* subspecies of Whistler's Warbler, Grey-crowned Warbler, and Green-crowned Warbler (Praveen 2022)[1]. Throughout a large part of their breeding ranges, species from this complex are arranged in a vertical sequence in the individual mountain ranges, encountering one another at contact zones that are often sharply defined (Martens et al. 2003). However, overlap in wintering grounds makes identification challenging.

During my master's dissertation fieldwork from 01 December 2023 to 15 March 2024 at Namdapha National Park in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, I recorded 19 observations of at least three individuals that I believed were Bianchi's Warblers. Although the contact calls of Bianchi's Warbler help differentiate the species from most other warblers in this complex, the challenge, on the field, was to separate Bianchi's Warbler from the extremely similar *nemoralis* subspecies of the Whistler's Warbler whose contact calls are not safely separable from the calls of Bianchi's Warbler from current knowledge (Rheindt 2006). A close observation of multiple individuals making the particular contact calls revealed that while some had extensive greyish median crown stripes with grey tones bleeding well below the black lateral crown stripes on

1 Two past submissions to *Indian BIRDS* with claims of Bianchi's Warbler from Namdapha region were rejected due to insufficient details - Editors