

SPOTTED AGAIN AFTER 29 YEARS: SPOT-BILLED PELICAN *PELECANUS PHILIPPENSIS* IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

ABDILLAH, H., IQBAL, M., PRAMUDITA, S., SIREGAR, A.L., HIDAYAT, A., HATTA, M. & TAMPUBOLON, A.E. 2022. Spotted again after 29 years: Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* in Indonesia. *Marine Ornithology* 51: 147–149.

We report an observation of a Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* on 07 October 2021 in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. This is the first sight-record of the species in Indonesia since 1992.

Keywords: Spot-billed Pelican, *Pelecanus philippensis*, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* is one of three pelican species that has been observed in the Indonesian archipelago (Greater Sundas and Wallacea; Eaton *et al.* 2021). This species' geographic range includes Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Korea, Japan, Asia Tenggara, and the Indonesian archipelago (Orta 1992, Johnsgard 1993, Hisahiro *et al.* 2010, Kannan & Pandiyan 2013). Within the Indonesian archipelago, the Spot-billed Pelican has been recorded in Sumatra and Java (MacKinnon 1988, Eaton *et al.* 2021). Two other pelican species observed in the area are Great White Pelican *P. onocrotalus* and Australian Pelican *P. conspicillatus*, with Great White Pelican recorded in Sumatra and Bali, and Australian Pelican reported in Java (Mason 2011, Iqbal 2013, Eaton *et al.* 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spot-billed Pelicans have historically been winter vagrants to Sumatra and Java, last reported in 1992 from West Java (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993, Eaton *et al.* 2021). On 07 October 2021, six of us (HA, SP, ATS, AH, MH, AMT) encountered a Spot-billed Pelican on a mudflat vegetated with mangrove in the coastal zone at Silo Baru Village (03°07'09"N, 099°47'22"E), Silau Laut Subdistrict, Asahan District, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The bird had distinctive characteristics typical of pelicans, including its white colour, large size, long beak, a throat pouch in the lower bill, and short legs (Fig. 1a). All of the pelican species seen in the Indonesian archipelago have these characteristics. The pelican observed in North Sumatra Province, however, had a slight crest on its rear crown, a narrow darker colour from crest to nape, whitish bare skin around its eyes, and a pinkish bill; in flight, it showed black primaries and secondaries below, and it had underwing coverts that were whitish pink (Fig. 1b). These characteristics are typical of the

Spot-billed Pelican (Orta 1992, Johnsgard 1993, Sonobe & Usui 1993, Robson 2011, Eaton *et al.* 2021, Harrison *et al.* 2021).

Earlier records of Spot-billed Pelican in Sumatra have been summarized in van Marle & Voous (1988) and Verheugt *et al.* (1993): in 1907, one specimen was collected in inland waters of West Sumatra Province; during winter 1981/82, sight records were logged from Lhokseumawe, Aceh Province, where the species was frequently observed; and in March 1986, within the coastal zone of South Sumatra Province, the presence of an immature bird indicated probable breeding. Additional reports of Spot-billed Pelican in Sumatra were provided by Holmes (1996) and Parrot & Andrew (1996): two were sighted in February 1988 at Way Wako, Way Kambas National Park, Lampung Province, southern Sumatra; about 10 Spot-billed Pelicans were reported in 1988 by villagers in Kuala Mesuji, Lampung Province, one of which villagers admitted to eating "within the last year or two"; and a total of seven Spot-billed Pelicans were reported in August 1990 in Bagan Siapi-api, Riau Province, with local information indicating possible breeding in the region of Sungai Daun (Daun River). This species has also been reported in Java, and also in West Java where it was reported regularly from April to October during the 1940s, last in 1992 (MacKinnon 1988, Eaton *et al.* 2021).

Our report of a Spot-billed Pelican in North Sumatra is the newest record of this species in Indonesia after a gap of 29 years (1992–2021). Holmes (1996) suggested that in view of the paucity of records elsewhere in Southeast Asia, this population is presumed to be resident; however, a breeding site has not yet been discovered. In Indonesia, it is likely that this species has been breeding in small numbers on Sumatra, but it probably no longer occurs on the island (BirdLife International 2022, eBird 2022). The Spot-billed Pelican was recently classified as Near Threatened because the recent population estimate was revised

upwards from a low of 5 500–10 000 birds in 2002 to an estimated 13 000–18 000 individuals in 2006 (BirdLife International 2022). An increasing population size in major breeding areas elsewhere may account for the recent appearance of Spot-billed Pelicans in Sumatra. Increasing numbers of birdwatchers and researchers in Indonesia, as well as easier access to field guides and optics, may also explain the recent rise in sightings of this species. These developments have likely led to increased communication among vagrant and rare migrant seabirds in this region in the past decade (Iqbal & Albayquni 2016, Hasyim *et al.* 2019, Iqbal *et al.* 2020a, Iqbal *et al.* 2020b). However, there are many coastal and marine areas in the Indonesian archipelago that are rarely visited by local birdwatchers.

Our recent observation of a Spot-billed Pelican in North Sumatra Province could be an indication that this species is a regular visitor in small numbers to Indonesia. As an archipelago country, there are many suitable habitats for the species. Targeted surveys and tapping into local information could shed more light into the status of Spot-billed Pelicans and other pelican species in Sumatra and the Indonesian archipelago and represents an important area of future research.

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Fig. 1. Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* photographed on 07 October 2021, on the coast of Silo Baru Village, Silau Laut Subdistrict, Asahan District, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. (A) Bird perched on a dead tree, and (B) same bird in flight. Photos by Hasri Abdillah.

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