

## Records of Redtailed and Whitetailed Tropicbirds in South African waters

A single Redtailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* was observed clearly while circling the Cape Gannet *Sula capensis* colony in the company of gannets on Bird Island, Algoa Bay on 10 August 1978. Its smaller size, wing shape, and shallow wing strokes were very noticeable. The red tail streamers were not conspicuous at a distance but the red beak and black line between eye and gape were distinctly seen. There were no discernible black bars on the upper wing surface characteristic of the Whitetailed Tropicbird *P. lepturus*.

Tropicbirds are rare vagrants to South African waters. A total of at least 21 records exists for the two species combined, with the first observation of live birds being from Dyer Island in 1927 (Gill 1936). Tables 1 and 2 present the available sighting and specimen records for Whitetailed and Redtailed Tropicbirds respectively. In addition to these records, a sighting of four unidentified *Phaethon* species was made during a seabird 'wreck' off Richards Bay, Kwazulu, in the first weekend of February 1976 (Sinclair 1976). It is possible that several of the sightings given in Tables 1 and 2 are of the same individuals.

From the tables it appears that Redtailed Tropicbirds are more frequently encountered than are Whitetailed Tropicbirds, the latter species being recorded during summer months only. Redtailed Tropicbirds may occur throughout the year, with a higher proportion of birds during the summer months.

The distributional records of these birds could possibly be related to the appearance of tropical cyclones, which periodically move down the Mocambique Channel during the northern monsoons, reaching our northern waters from mid-September to October. These months are then followed by periods of light northerly to north-easterly winds which freshen during November and December and blow strongly until February (Keyworth pers.obs.). These winds could result in the displacement of tropical seabirds into the southern African region. The fact that Redtailed Tropicbirds range more widely than Whitetailed Tropicbirds (Serventy *et al.* 1971) could account for the more frequent recordings of Redtailed Tropicbirds.

### References

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Table 1

Records of Whitetailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon lepturus* in South African waters

Date	Locality	Observer	Source
12 Feb 1912	Umgeni River, Durban	J.Alder (specimen)	Clancey (1964 1965)
	Port Alfred	G.R.Stocke (sighting)	Skead (1967)
24 Nov 1977	Cape Receife	B.Every (sighting)	<i>in litt.</i>
28 Nov 1977	Cape Receife	M.White (sighting)	pers.obs.
20 Dec 1978	Onrusrivier	S.Baron (sighting)	Baron 1979
9 Feb 1979	20 OOS, 6 3OE	F.Reiner (specimen) <sup>x</sup>	<i>in litt.</i>

<sup>x</sup> taken at sea and now in Portugal

Table 2

Records of Redtailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon rubricauda* in South African waters

Date	Locality	Observer	Source
-	Port Elizabeth	Rickard (tail feather)	Layard & Sharpe (1884)
18 Feb 1927	Dyer Island	- (2, specimen & a sighting)	Gill (1936)
Dec 1933	Bird Island, Algoa Bay	Hewitt (sighting)	Skead (1967, unpubl.ms)
25 Feb 1954	off East London	M. le Grange (3 sightings)	Skead (1967, unpubl.ms)
28 Feb 1954	Gonubie River mouth	Meisie (sighting)	Courtenay-Latimer (1955)
2 Mar 1954	near East London	J. Larkan (specimen)	Courtenay-Latimer (1955)
Mar 1954	Steynsrust, O.F.S.	M. Jones (specimen)	Courtenay-Latimer (1955)
15 Nov 1954	Durban	- (specimen, several seen)	Clancey (1955, 1965)
Jan 1959	Algoa Bay	M. le Gras (sighting, others seen)	McLachlan (1959)
22 Sept 1961	Port Elizabeth	- (specimen)	McLachlan (1961), C.J. Vernon ( <i>in litt.</i> )
31 May 1978	Cape Hangklip	J.H. Hofmeyr (photograph)	J. Cooper ( <i>in litt.</i> )
10 Aug 1978	Bird Island, Algoa Bay	A.L. Batchelor (sighting)	this paper