

Shearwater in Porbandar

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A team working for wildlife conservation in Porbandar district, called 'Prakruti The Youth Society', received a call in the evening on 13 July 2015, stating that an injured bird had been found near the 'Khapat Area' of Porbandar. The members of the team rushed to the place and found a sea-bird in an extremely dehydrated condition. Unfortunately, in spite of their efforts, the bird died.

It was later identified as either a Persian Shearwater (*Puffinus persicus*) or a Tropical Shearwater (*Puffinus bailloni*). Since detailed measurements and photos of underwings were not taken, it could not be identified conclusively. As far as I am aware, no Shearwater species has been noted in Porbandar earlier.



[Two subspecies are recognised for Persian Shearwater; nominate *P.p.persicus* in the Arabian Sea and *P.p.temptator* in Comoros Islands. Taxonomy of Tropical Shearwater is complex and not well understood. For the Indian Ocean area relevant to India, we follow taxonomy given in Onley & Scofield (2007), who give two subspecies; *P.b.bailloni*, from Réunion and Europa Islands in the Mozambique channel and *P.b.dichrous* in Seychelles, Maldives, Chagos and Aldabra. Onley & Scofield (2007) mostly follow the molecular phylogeny suggested by Austin et al. (2004), who state that the subspecies *nicolae*, *colstoni* and *atrodorsalis* are probably not valid, and are included in *P.b.dichrous*.

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that Tropical Shearwater {given as Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri* in Grimmett et al. (2011)} is sharply pied (black above and white below), sides of breast have large black patches, black cap extends well below the eyes, axillaries and wing linings are white while Persian Shearwater is paler brown above, with much less contrast between face and throat, axillaries are darker but primary coverts and many of secondary coverts are pale. There is no confirmed record of Tropical Shearwater from India (Grimmett et al. 2011) (it is said to be a vagrant to Sri Lanka) while Persian Shearwater, of the race *persicus*, is known to occur in the Arabian Sea, with many photos posted on the Oriental Bird Images website from pelagic birding trips off the western coast of India. The race *temptator* is resident in the Comoros Islands (Mohéli)

and is not known to occur in India.

Regarding identification of this bird, adult nominate *persicus* could be ruled out based on the dark, blackish upperparts – *persicus* shows brown/blackish-brown/chocolate-brown rather than black upperparts

(Onley & Scofield 2007) – and the moult timing (*P.persicus* moults from November to January and will show at least some brown and bleached feathers in July – which was not seen in this individual). Though some *persicus* are darker, the brownish wash on upperparts is apparent and the dark cap does not extend below the eyes, which is shown by Tropical Shearwater (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The race *temptator* is similar to *persicus*, with adults showing pale brownish plumage while fresh (recently fledged) juvenile *temptator* is darker with a brownish wash (Shirihai & Bretagnolle 2015). However there are some images on the internet of juvenile *persicus*, which look similar to this individual in having darker upperparts, and hence could cause confusion with Tropical Shearwater. However these juvenile birds, though darker, are never as black dorsally as Tropical Shearwaters.

Since some juvenile *persicus* are darker, it is difficult to conclusively rule it out here. But another factor in this individual probably not being a juvenile *persicus* is that *persicus* breeds from May-September (Onley & Scofield 2007) and since this sighting was in July, it is quite improbable for it to be a recently fledged juvenile. However a photo of a dark, probable juvenile/immature *persicus* from Fujairah, in the UAE (Al Dhaheeri 2014) taken on 15 July 2014, shows almost blackish head and nape (with a faint brownish tinge) but the dark on head does not extend below the eyes. Looking at the rather dark and black upperparts (without any brownish tinge), extensive black cap reaching below the eye, all black bill, pink tarsus with bluish feet and the general pied appearance, it can be said with reasonable certainty that this is a Tropical Shearwater (Audubon's Shearwater).

However it is extremely difficult to identify it to subspecies level. Tropical Shearwaters from islands in the Indian Ocean show a lot of variation and are considered as different sub-species by various authorities – for example Le Corre (2000) – who uses *P.lherminieri* based taxonomy. According to Table 1 given in this reference, two sub-species of Tropical Shearwater, *nicolae* and *colstoni*, show pink tarsus and brown undertail coverts (which were seen in this individual). Birds from Chagos Archipelago are treated as *nicolae* and in breeding plumage have stumpy, thick based bill with light blue colouration to base of lower mandible (Peter Carr, email dated 21 October 2015), which was not seen in this individual. Birds from Seychelles, also currently treated as *nicolae*, are dark sooty brown



and not as sharply black (Adrian Skerrett, email dated 23 October 2015). We have no information of the Maldives population of *nicolae*, which is believed to be close to the Chagos birds. It is also possible that this individual was of the subspecies *colstoni*, which is known to occur on Aldabra Island. However without detailed morphometric measurements, photographs of underwings and upperwings, and photos of bare parts, it is not possible to conclusively identify it to subspecies level.

Albeit a very small possibility exists that it could be a Persian Shearwater, this individual can be treated as Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni* (Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri*), without going into subspecific identification or describing its origins.

Hence birdwatchers are requested to always try and photograph wind blown sea-birds from all sides, taking photos showing the upperwings and underwings, and try and take measurements of such specimens to help in conclusive identification. It is also requested that if the bird dies, then the specimen should be preserved and sent to collections in BNHS or ZSI, where further molecular work can be carried out.

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Sighting of Red-necked Phalarope in South Gujarat

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On 27 August 2015, we visited Tena village (20.23 N, 72.66 E), approx. 20 km west of Surat. While we were observing waders in the village pond, we found a small bird which appeared to be little different. Having seen through binoculars and taking pictures, we confirmed that it was a Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) (Photo 1). We observed its activities for some time.

We visited the same place on 30 August 2015 and to our surprise, the Red-necked Phalarope was still there. On 13 September 2015, the pond had dried out and there were no birds.

There are a few published records of Red-necked Phalarope from Kachchh, Saurashtra and Central Gujarat (Raol 1991, Soni & Joshua 2012, Soni and Varu 2013). Raol (1991) observed it near Ahmedabad in 1987, which is unusual. Tejas Soni had seen it in Thol Bird Sanctuary near Ahmedabad on 6-5-2010. However we could not find any published records from South Gujarat and it seems that it is rare here.



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