

## Significant pelagic bird sightings off the Gujarat coast

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**Photos:** Team WildArt



**Bridled Tern**

The pelagic bird life off the coast of Gujarat; this is probably the most discussed, oft quoted and a never investigated subject. I have probably been dreaming to delve into this subject of bird watching since the last 3 to 4 years. But for one or the other reason, and because of innumerable hurdles in undertaking a voyage at sea off the coast of Gujarat, it could never turn into reality. The idea had, however, been sown within me to one day explore avian biodiversity occurring in the sea. I have been fortunate to come across friends who shared the same passion, and finally in November 2015, the dream started becoming a reality. A rough sketch was prepared on Google Earth by us to cover as much distance as possible in a four day trip. The brief conversations and rough sketches then started taking shape and the team members started getting in; a few refused and a few others accepted the invitation. Since it was a first ever trip, all were skeptical of the results, but finally twelve people dared to wade in those uncharted waters; Uday Vora, Yashodhan Bhatia, Mustak Mepani, Jumma Chacha, Mital Patel, Manjeet Jadeja, Arpit Deomurari, Vishal Chavda, Urmilus Gameti, Hardik Pala, Esha Munshi and me.

The next big task was to secure a sea-worthy vessel which could carry the team. Mustakbhai then came as the man on a mission and found out a nice passenger vessel ('Al-Khizar'). But then, the real struggle to get permissions started. It was one of the biggest battles to explain to the authorities why it was important to go to the sea to watch birds; officers from various departments were really at a loss to understand why

we wished to go to the sea to watch birds when it's much easier and safer to watch them on land! We faced so many nerve-racking moments that at times we felt that despite all our efforts, we would not secure permissions and won't be able to undertake the journey. In fact, we could get the last permission only 4 hours before actually boarding the vessel. However, there were many other officers who understood us and to whom we shall ever be thankful for their support.

Along with permissions, all of us had been working on the ornithological data to find out the species likely to be encountered. During the course of discussions with birders from India

and around the globe, a disappointing truth was coming forth that the season was completely wrong as the best season to see pelagic birds was during the months of April to October. However, we all were determined to break the ice and undertake the first ever trip to watch pelagic birds. Thus started our first pelagic trip.

### First Pelagic Trip:

We started the trip on 14 January 2016, for four days, starting from Jamnagar, through the Gulf of Kachchh, and ending on 17 January 2016 at Porbandar port (Map-1). We spent the first day on Bhaidar Island in Gulf of Kachchh, because it was not possible to hit the open sea by travelling the distance. We came across good numbers of waders, gulls, terns and other birds on Bhaidar Island. List of birds recorded at Bhaidar Island: (Common names are as per Grimmett *et al.* 2011) Caspian Gull, Heuglin's Gull, Steppe Gull, Pallas's Gull, Brown-headed Gull, Black-headed Gull, Slender-billed Gull, Lesser Crested Tern, Caspian Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Lesser Sand Plover, Greater Sand Plover, Kentish Plover, Grey Plover, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Crab-plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel,



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Eurasian Curlew, Terek Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Little Stint, Common Redshank, Great Knot, Sanderling, Darter, Barn Swallow and Painted Stork.

On the second day, we started early and by late morning, reached into the Arabian Sea. From here onwards, all of us were stretching our eyes out to find the elusive pelagic birds. The earlier apprehensions were coming true as we could not find any pelagic birds on the first day. The whole day passed and we could only see a few terns and gulls. The second day thus came to an end. On the third day, we again started travelling further as we had decided to travel almost up to 45 Nautical Miles. On the third day till mid noon, there was again no activity around and few of us started losing hope. But then, all of a sudden, some of us literally shouted 'pelagic' and thus came the first sighting of a pelagic species, a Swinhoe's Storm-petrel (*Oceanodroma monorhis*). An hour later, another bird flew by and we took pictures. The second of the two species found was Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*). Both were identified based on Onley & Scofield (2007) and Peterson & Harrison (1991). The last species we could see that evening was a Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*), identified based on Olsen & Larsson (1995). On the fourth day, we wound up the trip in the afternoon and landed at Porbandar Port. The first pelagic trip thus ended, yielding two pelagic species. The list of birds recorded at high seas is as follows: Caspian Gull, Heuglin's Gull, Steppe Gull, Sandwich Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Arctic Skua and Swinhoe's Storm-petrel.

### Second Pelagic Trip:

After the first trip, we decided to make another pelagic trip, but for one or the other reason, the plan could not be executed. In the meanwhile, we had been discussing the topic with a few of our friends and all of them shared the same thought that September would be the best month to make the trip. Shashank Dalvi and Omkar Dharwadkar specially gave a boost to our thoughts to go to sea again and Prasad Ganpule also vouched for it. Uday Vora this time came up with an idea to make a trip from Veraval and accordingly, the second trip was planned for two days off the coast from Veraval. Unfortunately, this time all the members could not participate in the trip and we were also apprehensive to ask others due to less success of the last trip. Thus, for the second trip, the team was made up of six people; Uday Vora, Vishal Chavda, Urmilus Gameti, Dhaivat Andharia, Esha Munshi and me.

On the first day we started around 09:30 hrs off the port of Veraval, heading off the coast into the sea. For this trip, the idea was to search the area within 15-20 NM off the coast. As the season was right, immediately within 2 NM (20° 50'



30.06" N 70° 21' 51.48" E), we sighted a Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*), which excited us. Going further, we came across a flock of around 4-5 Bridled Terns (*Onychoprion anaethetus*). These sightings raised our hopes, and by afternoon we came across a couple of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) and Wilson's Storm Petrels (*Oceanites oceanicus*) and the trip was turning out to be a real fruitful one. We thereafter continued sailing and came across different species of terns which turned out to be Bridled Terns, Common Terns, Lesser Crested Terns





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and even Gull-billed Terns. By late afternoon, we came across a fishing boat offloading a net. We decided to stay nearby and as the fishermen started dumping the chunks of dead fish into the sea, it attracted a mixed flock of terns numbering around 100-200 birds. After 15-20 minutes, the terns started feeding. A large bird, looking almost like a gull, started harassing the terns. Looking through the binoculars, we could confirm that it was an Arctic Skua. The first day evening thus finished with Arctic Skua, Common Terns, Bridled Terns, Masked Booby and Wilson's Storm Petrels.

On the second day we continued to sail towards the southwestern direction, which took us about 20-25 NM from the coast. As we were waking up, we found a flock of Wilson's Storm Petrels flying close by to the boat and amongst them was a larger, all brown bird which turned out to be a Jouanin's Petrel (*Bulweria fallax*). After a while, we again came across a big flock of Wilson's Storm petrels (around 8-9 birds) feeding on a dead sea turtle. We saw another bird flying low on the water along with a couple of gulls. It was identified as a Persian Shearwater (*Puffinus persicus*). Later on, a bird was photographed at a very long distance. Upon checking up the photographs, it was identified as Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*), which was confirmed by Praveen J. and Dipu K. In the afternoon, we once again came across a huge mixed flock of terns consisting of Bridled Terns, Common Terns and Lesser Crested Terns. Surprisingly, these birds were on the surface of the water, drifting along with the waves. We continued to sail and came across fishing boats in the evening, and based on the previous day's experience, we requested them to throw the fish waste into the sea. To our utter delight, once again the terns came in and started to feed on the dead fish, immediately followed by the appearance of an Arctic Skua that started attempts to rob the terns. What an amazing sight that was!

We were returning in the evening with the setting sun when we came across a gull which looked totally different. The plumage of the bird was definitely that of a juvenile. Later, by referring to reference book (Olsen & Larsson 2004) and confirming with gull expert Klaus Olsen, we came to the conclusion that it was a fresh juvenile Heuglin's Gull.

The number of birds that we found on this trip was beyond our expectations. In-fact, on talking to the fishermen on the boats, we came to know that they have been seeing huge numbers of black colored birds and they thought that they were chicks of the larger birds like gulls. These could be Wilson's or Swinhoe's Storm Petrels. According to them, such birds are found in bigger flocks of 100-200 birds in the month of August, which would be an ideal time to look for pelagic birds. Unfortunately, this time we missed out on Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aetherus*) and the Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*), but this pelagic trip proved to be really fruitful and if such trips are repeated by birdwatchers across the state on regular intervals, and in the right season, they are likely to add more pelagic species in the Gujarat checklist.

[Most of the earlier sightings of pelagic species from Gujarat were of windblown birds rescued near coastal areas. This is the first time that proper pelagic trips were undertaken and the participants are to be congratulated for this endeavour. It has resulted in the addition of Swinhoe's Storm-petrel to the birds of Gujarat, as it was not included in Parasharya et al. (2004). It was included in the latest checklist (Ganpule 2016), as this observation, along with photographs, was put on 'eBird' by the participants earlier. The sighting of Persian Shearwater is also significant, as this is the first photographic record off the Gujarat coast. The earlier record was 125 NM west of Kachchh, in the Arabian Sea (Ganpule 2016) and hence, this can also be considered to be the first confirmed record near the Gujarat coast. Further trips should be made to get a better understanding regarding the distribution of pelagic birds off the Gujarat coast – Eds]

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