

## Sighting of Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi* and Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* near Mahuva, Bhavnagar

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On 20 May 2021, at around 14:30 hrs, Vijay, my younger son, saw a large bird flying from the sea from the north-east direction. He called me and said that this bird was something he had never seen before and looked very different. I went and had a look and saw that it was headed parallel to the sea coast, about 400 feet away and was flying about 20 feet above the water. This bird was new for me also and I had never seen it before. It was flying steadily and passed near to my home.

A brief description of this bird (Bird 1) is as follows: a large black-and-white bird, with long tail, white underparts with black patch on side of breast, long pale bill, black wings, pale brownish patch on throat and whitish head. The location where this bird was seen is 21° 5' 12.92" N, 71° 51' 25.56" E. I identified it as a frigatebird (*Fregata* sp.).

After about an hour, at around 15:45 hrs, I was in the field near Nikol Bandhara Wetland, and on its edges I was looking at birds in the area. My attention was drawn towards a Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) attacking a blackish bird. I took a closer look and realised that this too was a frigatebird, but it looked different from the bird I had seen earlier near my home. I took some photographs and followed the bird on my motorcycle. I soon saw that this frigatebird was joined by another frigatebird, the one I had seen earlier, and both birds were soaring above the wetland. I immediately called the second author, and he soon joined me and we both saw the birds for almost 20 minutes.

A brief description of this bird (Bird 2) is as follows: a large black bird, with black underparts and wings, a white patch on



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belly extending on the underside of wings, reddish gular pouch, medium long bill and longish tail. The location where this bird was seen is 21° 4' 36.47" N, 71° 50' 20.28" E.

The second author took very good photographs and also some videos of the birds. Both birds were flying apart but soon came quite close to each other. At that time, we observed that there was a distinct difference in size of both the birds, with the earlier bird (with white belly) looking much larger. Both the birds then went towards the west, out to the sea and were lost from our view.

We soon saw the photographs on the computer but could not identify the birds. We shared the photos with other senior birders. The bird seen earlier (Bird 1), with the pale belly, was identified as a Christmas Island Frigatebird (*Fregata andrewsi*) while the other bird (Bird 2) was identified as a Lesser Frigatebird (*Fregata ariel*). This is the first record of a Christmas Island Frigatebird for Gujarat and the second record of Lesser Frigatebird for the state.



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[The authors took good photographs of both the birds. Identification of frigatebirds is tricky, especially in juvenile and immature plumages. James (2004) discussed the identification of all three regionally occurring frigatebirds in detail. For Bird 1, the distinct black breast-tabs, along with the long bill, white underparts with white lower belly, white axillaries lacking distinct axillary spurs, rusty

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throat, and large size are all features consistent with juvenile or second year Christmas Island Frigatebird; the black breast-tabs are absent in Lesser Frigatebird and Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*) at a similar age. Identification of Bird 2 is fairly straightforward; it is an adult Lesser Frigatebird showing black underparts with small white belly patch connected to white axillary spur, smaller bill and smaller size in direct comparison to the Christmas Island Frigatebird.

We sent the photos to Dipu Karuthedathu, who has extensively studied frigatebirds, for confirming the identification. He replied that Bird 1 was a second-year female Christmas Island Frigatebird while Bird 2 was an adult Lesser Frigatebird. The Christmas Island Frigatebird is 'Critically Endangered' and Karuthedathu et al. 2015 listed five records of this species from India during the 2014 south-west monsoon season. Thus, there have been reports of this species from India earlier.

It should be noted that the cyclonic storm 'Tauktae' had hit the Gujarat coast, making landfall near Una, and moved through the state on 17 May 2021 and 18 May 2021. The strong winds, which exceeded more than 100 kms / hr at landfall, resulted in many reports of windblown pelagic birds from the western coast of India. These frigatebirds must also have been blown towards land by the strong winds of the cyclone. After cyclone 'Amphan' hit the coast of West Bengal, many seabirds were blown inland, and there were reports of frigatebirds and shearwaters (*Puffinus* sp.) from inland

areas. Thus, the occurrence of the Lesser Frigatebird and Christmas Island Frigatebird near Mahuva can be attributed to the cyclonic storm which had hit the state two days earlier.

For Gujarat, there is a previous record of a Lesser Frigatebird; an injured bird was recovered on the banks of the Tapi River in South Gujarat, which was reported in 'Chatak', the newsletter of WWF (Ganpule 2016). This is the second record of Lesser Frigatebird for the state. The Christmas Island Frigatebird has not been included in the checklist of the birds of Gujarat (Ganpule 2020) and it is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat.

We are very grateful to Dipu Karuthedathu for helping with the identification – Eds]

## References

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## Yellow-eyed Pigeons *Columba eversmanni* on the periphery of the Little Rann of Kachchh in December 2005

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During a three week birding trip to northwest India in December 2005, we arrived at 04.30 hrs at Ahmedabad by overnight train from Udaipur. We were met at the station by a representative of Desert Coursers and driven to Camp Zainabad for breakfast. With no time to lose, we were soon allocated a jeep and a driver and we set off to the more arid

areas of the periphery of the Little Rann of Kachchh and were soon watching our prime target species for the day - a party of 6 Macqueen's Bustards (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*) – a 'dream species' for British birders since it is a very rare vagrant to Britain, last recorded in 1962. Of course, there were many other highlights including several groups of Wild Ass as well as Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*), both Pallid Harriers (*Circus macrourus*) and Montagu's Harriers (*Circus pygargus*) and Variable Wheatears (*Oenanthe picata*). Even better was to follow after dark as we went spotlighting, seeing five Sykes's Nightjars (*Caprimulgus mahrattensis*) – a species that we had not anticipated!

The following day, 28 December 2005, we targeted the more irrigated periphery of the Little Rann in the hope of finally seeing a species that had eluded us thus far – Sirkeer Malkoha (*Taccocua leschenaultii*). This proved no easy task but by