First records of three seabirds for the Maldives

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The avifauna of the Maldives has been poorly studied, with relatively few publications to date (Phillips & Sims 1958, Phillips 1963, Strickland & Jenner 1978, Shafeeg 1993, Ash & Shafeeg 1994, Anderson & Baldock 2001, Anderson 2007, Anderson et al. 2011) and it appears that migratory seabirds may be particularly under-recorded. Here we report the first records of three seabird species encountered at sea in Maldivian waters, which bring the number of avian species recorded from the Maldives to 190.

**Persian Shearwater Puffinus persicus**

On 8 October 2013 NB obtained an image of a single Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus* in the Vatteru Kandu, the channel between Vaavu and Meemu Atolls (about 3.233°N 73.533°E). It was part of a flock of seabirds—mainly Brown Noddies *Anous stolidus*, with some Lesser Noddies *A. tenuirostris*, Saunders’s Terns *Sternula antillarum* and about six Tropical Shearwaters *P. bailloni*—feeding over a tuna school. The Persian Shearwater was not noticed at the time, being overlooked by NB, RCA and MM among the Tropical Shearwaters, and was only identified later when NB’s images were reviewed (Plate 1). It showed dark axillaries and darker underwings, typical of Persian Shearwater but not of Tropical Shearwater (Plate 2).

The Persian Shearwater was, until recently, considered a rarity off southern South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Onley & Scofield 2007). However, a spate of recent sightings off south-west India (Praveen et al. 2011, Shivashankar et al. 2011, Praveen 2013) and Sri Lanka (de Silva Wijeyeratne 2010, De Silva 2011, RCA pers. obs.) suggests that it is a regular visitor to these areas. In contrast, during sea trips in Maldivian waters over the last 20 years, RCA has looked carefully at perhaps hundreds of Tropical Shearwaters and has never knowingly seen a Persian Shearwater. It therefore seems likely that this species rarely wanders far from the continental margins, and moves south-east from Arabia towards Sri Lanka along the west India shelf, as first suggested by Bourne (1960).

**Sooty Shearwater Ardenna grisea**

There have been three sightings of the Near Threatened Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea* (BirdLife International 2016a) in Maldivian waters, all single birds and all seen in April.

On 16 April 2003, seen by RCA at about 4.933°N 73.600°E off Kaashidhoo Island (Kaafu Atoll). It was seen clearly down to less than 100 m, heading north-west in company with Flesh-footed Shearwaters *A. carneipes*. Extensive and obvious white showed on the underwing, the bill was thin and dark, there was no foot projection and it was slightly smaller than nearby Flesh-footed Shearwaters.

On 17 April 2016, seen by RCA and ST at 4.450°N 73.733°E off Dhi Dhu Muli (North Malé Atoll). It was seen to within about 100 m, a medium-large shearwater, only slightly smaller than a Flesh-footed Shearwater with which it crossed paths; all brown, except for extensive, startlingly silver-white underwings, upperwings with diffuse pale brown patch, perhaps faded inner primaries, dark bill and no foot projection. It was in company with Greater Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii*, Brown Noddies and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, feeding over a tuna school.

Another on 17 April 2016, was seen by RCA, ST and MM at 4.483°N 73.708°E, north of Meerufenfushi Island (North Malé Atoll). It was seen to within about 100 m, a medium-large shearwater, only slightly smaller than a Flesh-footed Shearwater with which it crossed paths; all brown, except for extensive, startlingly silver-white underwings, upperwings with diffuse pale brown patch, perhaps faded inner primaries, dark bill and no foot projection. It was in company with Greater Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii*, Brown Noddies and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, feeding over a tuna school.

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Another on 17 April 2016, was seen by RCA, ST and MM at 4.483°N 73.708°E, north of Meerufenfushi Island (North Malé Atoll). It was seen to about 200 m, a medium-large shearwater, all brown except for large, obvious white patches on the underwings, bill dark, with no foot projection. It was heading south-east, in the direction of the earlier sighting on the same day, in company with about seven other birds which all appeared to be Flesh-footed Shearwaters.

In addition, there was a possible sighting by RCA on 9 April 2003, at about 3.367°N 73.750°E, off Vaavu Atoll. This bird showed a clear white underwing flash, and was slightly smaller than nearby Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters *A. nigrescens*. 

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**Plate 1.** Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus*, Vatteru Kandu, Maldives, 8 October 2013.

**Plate 2.** Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni*, Thaa Atoll, Maldives, 4 November 2015.
but no other distinguishing features were seen; it is therefore considered a probable Sooty Shearwater.

The first of these sightings (16 April 2003) was positively identified as Sooty Shearwater at the time, but the record was not published because it was not supported by images or other observers. It is now backed up by two more records, seen by more than one observer; however, as no images of any of these birds were obtained, some additional comment is appropriate.

As some authors (Colston & Gallagher 1983, Hirschfeld 1992) have cautioned, Sooty Shearwaters in the northern Indian Ocean have to be distinguished from the much commoner Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, both of which may sometimes show some pale on their underwings. We agree, and note that some Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters do show noticeably pale grey-brown underwing feathering and may show a moderately bright sheen when they catch the light. However, the extensive, bright silver-white wing-linings seen on the birds reported here were of an entirely different order. It is also necessary to separate Sooty Shearwater from Short-tailed Shearwater *A. tenuirostris*, a few individuals of which may show atypically pale underwings (Onley & Scofield 2007). The Short-tailed Shearwater appears to be rare in our region, with only a single record from the Maldives (Anderson 2007). The chances of finding three atypical individuals with pale underwings must therefore be very small. Nevertheless, we separate our birds from Short-tailed Shearwater using the following features: in size they were only marginally smaller than nearby Flesh-footed Shearwaters, with a relatively heavy-bodied appearance; the tails were not short and there was no sign of foot projection; the bills were relatively long and slender, and heads were uniform in colour, with no sign of a cap or hood. We also note that ST and MM have seen thousands of Sooty Shearwaters in the North Sea in Europe, whilst RCA has seen hundreds of Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters in Maldivian waters.

There appear to have been only two previous published records of Sooty Shearwater for South Asia, both sight records from Sri Lanka: off Trincomalee in November 1974 (Sinclair 1977, Robertson 1994) and off the south-west coast in October 2007 (Pepper & Hettige 2008). Without supporting specimens or images, this species was considered ‘hypothetical’ in South Asia by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). However, it is now apparent that Sooty Shearwater is a regular, albeit not common, southern winter visitor to the north Arabian Sea and Red Sea. The species has been reported from Israel (Shirihai 1987, 1996, Perlman & Meyrav 2009), Jordan (Andrews et al. 1999), Oman (Colston & Gallagher 1983, Eriksen & Victor 2013), United Arab Emirates (Aspinall 2003, Pedersen & Aspinall 2010) and Iran (Ghasemi et al. 2008). At the head of the Red Sea at Eilat, Israel, Sooty Shearwaters occur from mid-March to mid-August, but mainly in May–June (Shirihai 1996). Slightly further south, along the northern margin of the Arabian Sea, sightings peak in April–May (Figure 1). That some Sooty Shearwaters migrate northwards through Maldivian waters in April is therefore not unexpected, although a review of seabird sightings during pelagic trips off Goa and Kerala, India, did not produce any records (J. De Souza in litt. 2016).

**Abbott’s Booby* Papasula abbotti**

On 6 October 2014, a single Abbott’s Booby *Papasula abbotti* was clearly seen by RCA, Paul Bench and Susan Lammiman from a boat in the Veimandhoo Channel between Thaa and Laamu Atolls (2.167°N 73.317°E). It was a long-winged and long-necked booby with dark upperwings and tail, and its identification was not in doubt. The bird was first seen circling at some altitude; it was followed and observed to dive twice. The second dive was barely 100 m in front of the boat and by the time the bird surfaced and was ready to take off it was alongside the boat, allowing excellent views (Plates 3 & 4).

Although this species previously bred on some islands in the western Indian Ocean, including Assumption, the Seychelles

**Plates 3 & 4. Abbott’s Booby* Papasula abbotti*, Veimandhoo Channel, Maldives, 6 October 2014.**

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**Figure 1.** Seasonal occurrence of Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea* in the northern Arabian Sea, based on records from Oman (Eriksen & Victor 2013), United Arab Emirates (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010) and Iran (Ghasemi et al. 2008).
group and Rodrigues, Mauritius, it appears to have been extirpated from the region over 100 years ago (Skerrett et al. 2001). Breeding is now confined to Christmas Island in the east Indian Ocean, although it does forage more widely, particularly in the Java Sea during non-breeding periods (James & McAllan 2014, BirdLife International 2016b).

This appears to be the first confirmed record for South Asia of this Endangered species, although there have been previous sightings from the Chagos Archipelago, about 500 km to the south (Bourne 1971, Hirons et al. 1976, Symens 1999), that were all published without supporting evidence and not widely accepted. Carr (2011) considered that its presence at Chagos had not been established ‘beyond reasonable doubt’, while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) regarded the presence of this species in South Asia as ‘hypothetical’. The likelihood of the occurrence of Abbott’s Booby at Chagos may now be re-evaluated in the light of this record from the south of the Maldives.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the captains and crew of MV Isis and MV Hope Cruiser, to Hamza Hameed, and to fellow passengers, for making these sightings possible.

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