

SIGHT RECORD OF A WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD

(*Phaeton lepturus*) IN MASSACHUSETTS

Submitted by Blair Nikula, 23 Atwood Lane, Chatham, MA 02633.

Observers: Blair Nikula and Peter Trull

Location: Cackle Cove Beach, South Chatham, MA

Date: 27 September 1985

Weather: Overcast; temperature in the low 70s F; wind S at 50-70 mph. Hurricane Gloria was passing through central Connecticut at the time of the sighting.

Optics: 10 x 40 and 10 x 50 binoculars.

Description of the sighting.

At the time of the sighting, Peter Trull and I were sitting in our vehicles in the parking lot at Cackle Cove Beach watching for storm-blown seabirds over Nantucket Sound.

I had arrived first at 2:00 P.M. and during the next hour and a half recorded 50+ jaegers, mostly Parasitic. Shortly after 3:00 P.M., the intensity of the wind increased noticeably, followed by a pronounced increase in the number of birds, particularly Leach's Storm-Petrels, which had not been present until that point. Both jaegers and storm-petrels seemed to have great difficulty maneuvering against the wind, and some were actually over the beach at times, with a few storm-petrels even flying over the flooded marsh adjacent to the parking lot.

At 3:30 P.M., seconds after Peter Trull arrived, a skua species, probably South Polar, passed by at a distance of approximately 75 yards, and disappeared to the east, passing over the beach to our east at one point.

At 3:40 P.M., I spotted a bird through the windshield approximately 75 yards to the south, low over the water. I at first thought it was a small gull, based on its size and the presence of a dark W pattern across the upperwings. I called Trull's attention to the bird, and as it continued to move northeastward, it became more clearly visible out the open side window of my car. The bird was still facing south but was blown northeastward by the wind, apparently flying backward! At one point, the bird banked to the right, affording me a clear view of its dorsal surface, at which point I instantly recognized it as a tropicbird and began calling to Trull.

The bird gradually gained altitude as it continued to be pushed northward, eventually passing over the beach about 80-100 yards east of our position, at an altitude of 100-150 feet, and finally disappeared from sight over land approximately a quarter mile north-northeast of the parking lot.

The total viewing time was perhaps 45 seconds. Due to a lack of precipitation, visibility was fairly good, averaging nearly a mile or so, but the severe winds made the viewing difficult.

### Description of the bird.

The bird was about the size of a large tern or small gull. The wings were narrow and appeared very attenuated, though this effect may have been exaggerated by the bird's labored flight. The body was pure white as was the entire dorsal surface of the bird except for a black bar running diagonally across the inner wing and black outer primaries, creating a bold W pattern against an otherwise strikingly white surface. I did not see the bill at all, nor did I notice any black around the eye. I also did not see any elongated tail streamers, though they may well have been present. A more likely explanation is that the elongated central tail feathers were absent, having recently been molted. Palmer reports in *Handbook of North American Birds*, volume 1, Yale University Press, 1962, that following completion of the nesting season, which extends into late summer on Bermuda, White-tailed Tropicbirds undergo a complete pre-basic molt.

While not all field marks were visible, the bird was seen well enough to eliminate all similar species. Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) lacks the black bar across the inner wing and is heavily barred across the back in any plumage. The large terns all lack the black bar across the wing, have considerably less black on the primaries above and would show varying amounts of black on the rear portions of the head. The small gull species that show a similar W pattern across the dorsal surface in immature plumage differ in structure, being chunkier with broader wings and having extensive gray on the back and upperwing and black tailbands. Most also have dusky or blackish coloration on the hindneck.

Neither observer had previous experience with White-tailed Tropicbird, though the writer has seen Red-tailed Tropicbird in Tobago. While the details do not constitute a "textbook" sighting, there was never any doubt in my mind, once I had a clear view of the bird, as to its identity, and I am confident in reporting it as a White-tailed Tropicbird.

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