

HOW ABOUT THAT TAIL?

by Julius Rosenwald II, Menemsha,
Martha's Vineyard

Monday, September 15, 1986, was another beautiful day on Martha's Vineyard. The air was balmy, even at 7:00 A.M. Most of the people who had made up our summer birding group had either already left the island or were in the process of departure. This is the time of year when we usually see hawks. Living high up overlooking the Atlantic, one can easily see quite a number of raptors - Sharp-shinned, Merlin, American Kestrel, and Marsh Hawks (Northern Harriers) - flying low in a westerly direction. All are sure to pass by Gay Head Cliffs. So I drove to the cliffs, parked the car, and walked through a fine patch of poison ivy to a lookout directly at the edge of the cliff. Merlin were coming by this spot in quite some numbers. I was sorry my friends were not along. They'd have enjoyed the hour, the color of the sky, and, of course, the bird activity.

One cannot be in such a place without occasionally looking down over the cliff edge. The sea was quite calm. The sun was beginning to spread its light over the cliff face. It was about 8:20 A.M. when I first took a really good look at the waves as they washed ashore ninety feet below me. There, next to a small rock, not fifteen feet from shore, was a largish white bird sitting in the water with what appeared to be string tied to its tail. Binocs were adjusted to the scene below, and the first look showed a lipstick-red bill! The bird quickly eased itself into the air with long, thin wings tipped with black. A pale lattice-pattern showed along the back of the bird, an eyestripe behind the eye. But that bill!



Red-billed Tropicbird
Martha's Vineyard, MA September 15, 1986

Photo by Jonathan Alderfer

At first I couldn't believe that I was seeing a tropicbird. Though I've birded quite a bit over the years, I have never seen one on the Vineyard. I had seen, as I recall, tropicbird in Tobago, in the south Caribbean Sea. Then, the horrible thought that no one was around to see this bird, too, hit me - really shook me.

I felt in my pockets for change. I had only a quarter. Running back through the same poison ivy to the Aquinnah Shop, where there was a pay phone, I called my wife, asking her to phone my birding companion, eagle-eyed Vernon Laux, and tell him that *there was a Red-billed Tropicbird at the Gay Head Cliffs.*

Having made the call, I returned to the little lookout spot as the bird was ducking behind one of the faces of the colored cliffs - flying to the right. All I could think about was that no one would ever believe me if I told them what I had seen. Suppose Judy had not been able to reach Vern? Then what? Well, he did arrive. He was there in about twelve minutes with Whit Manter and Jonathan Alderfer, both excellent birders. (The usual time to Gay Head from his house would be about twenty-five minutes.)

By this time, I had moved to yet another lookout, the location of a gun emplacement during World War II. From this vantage point I felt that I would spot the bird again if it hadn't taken off toward the Elizabeth Islands. (These are a small chain of islands that lie between the mainland and the Vineyard.)

I heard Vern yell as he and the others came up. "Where is it?" "Which way did it go?" "How long ago did you see it?" "Did you get a real good look at it?" It could not have been five minutes from the time the trio arrived that Jonathan said, "There it is," and we all zeroed in on it. When the bird veered and showed the bill, a shriek went up! "It's a Red-billed Tropicbird! I'll be a s-- of a b----!" Etc., etc.

The flight took the bird and its wonderful wavy tail out toward the point of Gay Head, which is marked by a Coast Guard lighthouse. It flew back and forth quite close to shore, often harassed by immature Herring Gulls. Its evasive techniques were agile and sharp. Then it disappeared around the point.

The four of us scrambled down the cliffs to the beach area below and soon picked it up again. Jonathan had a camera with a 500 mm lens, and he was busy getting every flight pattern, every movement of this tropical pelagic bird, so far off course.

Vern returned to make some calls and to notify some others. Jonathan and I remained on the beach for some time over an hour and a half, during which time he took two rolls of film, some as close as thirty-five feet. The bird filled the view finder!

That day, the bird was seen by about ten people; one of them saw it from a boat. During the night of September 15 and into the early hours of Tuesday the sixteenth, there was a horrible storm - windy, torrents of rain, thunder - the works. I could only think that our bird was on its way to either Greenland or Java. But I returned to the cliff again on Tuesday morning. One could not hold binocs - it was so windy. No sighting was possible. On Tuesday evening, Eloise Vanderhoop Page, a native of Gay Head, phoned me after she had read the front-page article in *The Vineyard Gazette*. (The Tuesday, September 16, 1986, edition of the island newspaper had a front page story on the tropicbird.) She said that she had seen that bird for two weeks and wondered about it. She thought it might have had string caught in its tail.

No sighting again until Thursday when a birding group spotted it from the same place. Ah, more excitement! Friday, I saw the tropicbird again and pointed it out to Gus Daniels - the 313th bird he had seen on the Vineyard. Saturday, September 20, brought people from Massachusetts Audubon as well as Peter Alden, Brad Blodget (state ornithologist), and Bill Drummond of the Brookline Bird Club. Folks alerted by a private rare-bird hotline came early on the first ferry, from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire - about forty-five of them. The bird did show up at 11:00 A.M. and again at 1:00 P.M. I missed both sightings but was more than pleased that so many had seen it. The whole event was amazing to me - a first record for Massachusetts, and . . . *that tail was unbelievable!*

JULIUS "Dooley" ROSENWALD II of Menemsha, Martha's Vineyard, and Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, states that he keeps no bird lists but is "willing to look at any bird that wants to get in front of me." A lifelong interest in birds began when his mother enrolled him in Mrs. Colten's bird class. This lady had a suitcase full of stuffed birds. The children were shown a specimen bird, taught its song, and then sent forth to find it. His cousin hated the class, but Dooley loved it and has been a birdwatcher ever since. He has traveled worldwide, as far as Outer Mongolia and twice to Nepal, and his binoculars are always with him. He also enjoys photographing birds, especially in flight. Today, this active, sharp-eyed birder is father of three and grandfather of five and describes himself as semi-retired from business. However, he works with an educational, nonprofit corporation of twenty-seven colleges, universities, and medical schools - the Science Center in Philadelphia - an organization "engaged in the application of scientific and technical knowledge to improve the quality of life." When the Red-billed Tropicbird lingered on through October, Julius Rosenwald estimated that "somewhere between 750 to 900 caring people have seen the bird."