

ANOTHER MASSACHUSETTS FIRST: RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Arlington

The sighting of a Red-billed Tropicbird off Gay Head in Martha's Vineyard on Monday, September 15, 1986, is the first record for this species (*Phaethon aethereus*) in the state, the third record for the Northeastern Maritime Region, and except for birds seen well out at sea off the coast of Georgia and North Carolina, the only time a healthy, flying adult of this species has been seen this close to the eastern seaboard of the U. S. The bird was first identified by Julius Rosenwald II, whose account of this adventure appears elsewhere in this issue.

When not nesting, the Red-billed Tropicbird is a lone pelagic wanderer, ranging widely at sea throughout its nesting range, i.e., the Caribbean (which supports a total population of 1600 pairs), the eastern Pacific off Mexico and northern South America from Colombia to Peru, including the Galapagos Islands, the South Atlantic off Brazil, and in another hemisphere, the eastern Atlantic off Africa, the northern Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf.

As an extralimital wanderer, this species occurs *regularly** off the Pacific coast from southern California south to Peru; *irregularly*, north to the state of Washington, west to Hawaii (where all three species of tropicbird were seen together in April 1983), and south as far as Chile; and is *casually accidental* in southern Arizona, in Madeira, and in southern Africa. Off the western Atlantic coast, it is infrequently seen from the Greater Antilles and south to Brazil and is only a *casual* visitor to the Atlantic coast of North America from Florida to Rhode Island (and now, Massachusetts). An old report from the Newfoundland Banks is unsubstantiated, and the Martha's Vineyard bird is the most northerly record to date. Most Red-billed Tropicbirds found along the eastern seaboard of the U. S. have been immatures - dead or dying or oiled. Of these, the most recent was the carcass of an immature Red-billed picked up on Moonstone Beach in Rhode Island on July 19, 1975 by a well-known Massachusetts birder - Nancy Clayton. The skin of Nancy's bird resides at the M.C.Z. at Harvard University.

The most remarkable features of this handsome ternlike bird in adult life are its large, slightly decurved, bright red bill and two threadlike central tailfeathers that extend beyond the 20-inch body to double the bird's overall length to 35-42 inches, producing an extraordinary and graceful conformation that prompted Linnaeus to formulate the Latin name, *Phaethon aethereus* - ethereal offspring of the sun god. Other distinctive markings of the silky white adult are a broad black stripe through the

*The terms *regularly*, *irregularly*, *casual*, and *accidental* are italicized to indicate that the technical meaning is intended as defined by the A.O.U. and *American Birds*.

black eye (sometimes extending around the nape), fine black barring on the upperparts, which often appear gray at a distance, black marks on the wing tips, gray legs, and black feet. The tail feathers are white with black shafts, and the long all-white streamers are carried in a graceful flowing arc. The long, narrow, pointed wings are broadly attached to the body, and the flight is strong with rapid, pigeonlike wing beats. The sexes are similar. Immatures of the Red-billed and the White-tailed species may be confused. The Red-billed juvenile can be distinguished by its larger size (18-20 inches compared with 15-16 inches) and by the finer barring on the back that appears gray or dusky at a distance rather than showing as distinct barring.

Happily, the Martha's Vineyard bird was an adult and so could not be confused with the White-tailed Tropicbird. Two of the latter species appeared during Hurricane Gloria in September of 1985: an adult sighted off Chatham and an immature that collapsed on the playing field of Governor Dummer Academy in South Byfield. [See *Bird Observer* 13: 332-335, December 1985.]

The Red-billed is the largest member of the tropicbird family, Phaethontidae, which has only the single genus *Phaethon* and only three members throughout the world - Red-billed, White-tailed, and Red-tailed - hence an easy family to "wipe out" (the expression among world listers for having ticked off all the birds within a given group or family.) These are members of a large primitive group of birds known as Pelicaniformes, which include such morphologically diverse creatures as pelicans, boobys, cormorants, anhingas, and frigatebirds.

This species is marine and chiefly oceanic when not nesting, coming to land mostly on cliffs where take-off is easier. Although it is strong, elegant, and graceful in flight, the tropicbird cannot walk erect on land but must shuffle along with the body in contact with the ground. When feeding, the Red-billed Tropicbird hovers and then plunges from a height to catch fish and squid underwater in its beak. The prey is caught sideways in the bill, not stabbed, and is swallowed underwater or just at the surface. These birds do catch flying fish on the wing but are seldom seen in flight with prey in the beak.

The breeding season in the Caribbean (the probable home of our visitor) is an extended period in the first half of the year with most eggs laid from late January into March. The birds nest on island cliffs, and each pair lays but a single egg on the bare ground within a nesting cranny or under a sheltering overhang. Incubation requires 43 days, and the partly altricial offspring are nidicolous, learning to fly only after 70-100 days and following the adults around for a long time after fledging. Tropicbirds become gregarious when nesting, their nests spaced as little as one meter apart, depending on the room available. Both adults participate in the incubation and care of the young. A long-lasting monogamous pair-bond may be formed in successful breeders, who then are faithful to the nesting site season after season (if the mate is the same), and these nest sites are vigorously defended.

Although introduced rats can be a problem and may actually prevent tropicbirds from occupying islands where these rodents are abundant, man is the only serious predator of the tropicbird. Its egg and the bird itself are taken for food in some parts of the world, and formerly, the skins and feathers were widely used for adornment. A major factor limiting population is the competition for nest sites (vacant or abandoned sites are always quickly occupied). Almost all the eggs and chicks that are destroyed on the nesting ground are lost as a result of fighting among adults of the same species.

What brought the Gay Head tropicbird to these waters? The exact date of its arrival is unknown. When the story appeared in *The Vineyard Gazette* on Tuesday, September 16, a report came from an island resident suggesting that this bird had been around for two weeks or more, mistaken for a large tern with string caught in its tail. Assuming an arrival date around the first of September, the only weather system chronologically and geographically close enough was Hurricane Charlie. But this is only speculation, and certainly this bird gave no indication of being a "tempest tossed" refugee.

This beautiful, healthy, adult Red-billed Tropicbird actively disporting off the cliffs of Gay head with tail jauntily cocked and streamers aloft - to the immense satisfaction of visitors from as far away as Florida - constitutes a remarkable vagrant bird record for the eastern seaboard but remains something of a mystery. As October ended, the bird was still around, but no one was willing to predict the total length of its stay.

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