RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD IN NEW ENGLAND, 1986

by Kyle Jones, Bar Harbor, Maine

Maine and Massachusetts both established first records for Redbilled Tropicbird in the autumn of 1986. A great deal of similarity in the two events prompted this review. The sightings establish new northerly limits for the species in the northwestern Atlantic.

To make a comparison of the two sightings, I examined the published information on the Martha's Vineyard discovery (Arvidson 1986; Rosenwald 1986), notes from the Mount Desert Rock appearance provided by David James and Harriet Corbett, photographs from Jonathan Alderfer (in Rosenwald 1986) and Corbett, and personal experience with the Martha's Vineyard bird.

The Red-billed Tropicbird was seen at Mount Desert Rock, Maine, on August 31, 1986 (see Corbett, this issue). Fifteen days later another Red-billed Tropicbird was documented on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (September 15, 1986), although the bird may have been present there for as much as "two weeks" prior to its identification (Rosenwald 1986). Both sightings occurred after the passing of Tropical Storm Charley in mid-August, but no signs of storm-caused wear were apparent (e.g., abraded flight feathers, broken tail streamers, fatigue).

Aside from the temporal similarities of these events, the physical appearances are also noteworthy. Both records are of adult-plumaged birds in an apparently healthy condition with full tail streamers and very pale dorsal barring.



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

Photo by Jonathan Alderfer

A look at past records for this species in the northwestern Atlantic include single dead or dying specimens from New York and Rhode Island. Reference for the Newfoundland Banks (A.O.U. 1957) was reported by Arvidson (1986) as "unsubstantiated." Thus, the Maine record establishes the most northerly record for the species, and both sightings provide first state records.

What does all of this mean? To me, it suggests that the same individual may have been responsible for both appearances. One possible scenario is that the bird came north, with or without the assistance of Tropical Storm Charley, briefly visited Mount Desert Rock, and then turned up on Martha's Vineyard, 165 nautical miles to the southwest, sometime in the first half of September.

No conclusive evidence has been found to prove or disprove this hypothesis, but it provides stimulating possibilities for the comment posed by the Massachusetts Audubon Society's public service information release about "... what it was doing for two weeks prior to being seen" (M.A.S. 1986).

I thank those authors and photographers kind enough to publish details on this important event, Harriet Corbett and David James for allowing me access to their personal notes and photographs, and Bird Observer and the Massachusetts Audubon Society for bringing the discoveries to the public.

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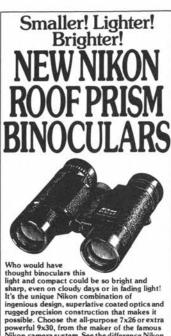
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