

Short Communications

BLACK-NAPED TERN *STERNA SUMATRANA* BREEDING ON COSMOLEDO ATOLL, SEYCHELLES

ROSS M. WANLESS¹ & RICHARD W. WHITE²

¹*Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
(rwanless@botzoo.uct.ac.za)*

²*Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen, AB10 1UZ Scotland, United Kingdom*

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The Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* is a small tern with a tropical distribution, breeding from Aldabra Atoll, Seychelles, western Indian Ocean to Fiji and Samoa in the Pacific Ocean (Higgins & Davies 1996). The species has only recently been definitely recorded from Cosmoledo Atoll (9°43'S, 47°34'E, *c.* 1000 km south-west of Mahe, Seychelles and *c.* 100 km east of Aldabra Atoll, part of the Aldabra Group), but was probably overlooked by earlier visitors (reviewed in Mortimer & Constance 2000). No nests have been reported previously from Cosmoledo, although Stoddart (1984) speculated that they breed there, and Skerrett (1999) mentions '30 pairs on East North and small numbers elsewhere' without supporting details. A.E. Burger (*in litt.*) photographed a pair performing a courtship display on Île du Nord, Cosmoledo on 8 March 2000, but did not confirm breeding. It was not listed as a breeding species for Cosmoledo Atoll by Mortimer & Constance (2000) but it is by Skerrett *et al.* (2001) and Rocamora & Skerrett (2001), based on Skerrett (1999).

We visited Pagode Island, on the southward rim of Cosmoledo, on 9 April 2001. About 30 adult Black-naped Terns were roosting on a small beach facing the lagoon. On a seaward, south-facing beach

at the south-west corner of the island we disturbed a loose colony of breeding Black-naped Terns (Fig. 1). There was a minimum of two pairs with at least one downy chick each, three nests with single eggs and one nest with two eggs (i.e. six breeding pairs). Nests were situated just above the high-tide mark in the lee of a small (*c.* 2 m high), steep-sided dune, approximately 1–3 m apart. The area was not exhaustively searched. The breeding location and site are more typical of the species (see Higgins & Davies 1996), unlike on Aldabra Atoll, where Black-naped Terns usually nest as isolated pairs on rocky substrata on tiny lagoon islets (Diamond 1971, Diamond & Prŷs-Jones 1986, RMW pers. obs., Fig. 2). Aldabran birds may be avoiding nest predation by abundant terrestrial crabs *Birgus latro* and *Cardisoma* sp., largely absent from Cosmoledo (RMW pers. obs.), or by introduced Black Rats *Rattus rattus*, almost certainly absent from Pagode Island.

The number of adult Black-naped Terns present at Pagode Island suggests the breeding population of Cosmoledo Atoll is larger than six pairs, perhaps closer to the 50–100 pairs of Skerrett *et al.* (2001). This is supported by their breeding pattern on nearby Aldabra Atoll, which is dispersed both temporally (November to



Fig. 1. Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* nest at Cosmoledo Atoll, Seychelles.



Fig. 2. Incubating Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* on a small lagoon islet at La Gigi, Aldabra Atoll, Seychelles.

June) and spatially (Diamond 1971, Diamond & Prÿs-Jones 1986). The nests found on Cosmoledo were thus probably among the last of the season, although no juveniles were noticed. We believe this is the first description of nesting, and thus the first substantiated breeding record, for Black-naped Terns on Cosmoledo.

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