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Possible Winter Quarters of the Aleutian Tern?

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ABSTRACT.—Recent observations of the Aleutian Tern (*Sterna aleutica*) in the coastal waters around Hong Kong in spring and fall, and Singapore and the Indonesian islands of Karimun and Bintan between October and April indicate that at least part of the population of this species migrates through and winters in these areas. Our observations during December 1997, suggest that the coastal waters of Java, Bali and Sulawesi may form an additional part of the winter range of this species. *Received 3 August 1998, accepted 17 June 1999.*

The Aleutian Tern (*Sterna aleutica*) breeds along the western coast of Alaska (USA) and in Asia on the east coast of Kamchatka and Sakhalin (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). In Alaska, birds return to colonies during early May and then disperse during August and September after breeding, (Harrison 1983). Both the AOU Checklist (1998) and Harrison (1983) state that this species' winter range is "unknown".

During the last decade or so there has been a steady accumulation of records for this species outside its breeding range from Southeast Asia. Lee (1992) reported six specimens collected in May 1984 in the Mindanao Sea off Bohol, Philippines. Brazil (1991) noted approximately ten records from Honshu and Hokkaido, Japan including one instance of probable breeding. One exceptional record involves the occurrence of a single vagrant bird on the Farne Islands off the coast of northeast England during May 1979 (Dixey et al. 1981). More recently, during August and September 1992 as many as 190 birds were observed off the southern and southeastern coast of Hong Kong (Kennerley et al. 1993).

Initially birds were observed in breeding (alternate) plumage in late August but most then molted into non-breeding (basic) plumage during September. Details of the latter, poorly known plumage, can be found in Lee (1992), Kennerley and coworkers (1993) and Kennerley and Ollington (1998). Subsequently, small numbers have been observed annually in Hong Kong waters including individuals in breeding plumage during April–June. It is now established there as a regular and fairly common migrant in varying numbers. Several hundred migrants have also been recorded annually in August and September, with occasional birds recorded in October (Leven et al. 1994; Carey et al. 1995, 1996).

From September to October 1994 this species was common within the Riau Archipelago, Indonesia, and a single bird was also recorded there in March 1996 (Rajathurai 1996). Kennerley and Ollington (1998) observed small numbers between 18 September and 25 April in the Straits of Malacca and in the seas around the island of Grand Karimun with a maximum number of 15 positively identified birds on 19 January 1996, with more than 100 distant terns also present.

Small numbers of Aleutian Terns were also observed off the east coast of Singapore in September and October 1994 (Kennerley and Ollington 1998). No records were reported during 1995 but a concerted effort to locate this species in 1996 resulted in at least 15 birds sighted 13 October in the Straits of Singapore between Jurong and the Horsburgh Light (Kennerley and Ollington 1998).

We report here the first probable records from Java, Bali, and Sulawesi in the Republic of Indonesia and identify a likely proportion of this species' wintering range.

On 30 November 1997 between Labuan and the north coast of Ujung Kulon National Park, at the western tip of Java, from a boat we observed, about 20 probable adult Aleutian Terns in groups of 3–6, all in non-breed-

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ing plumage. We obtained good views of these birds in flight and perched as they fished together with other seabirds among and from the numerous fish-trap platforms. Similarly, on 4 December 1997 we also observed, from a boat a flock of approximately 35 probable Aleutian Terns during the late afternoon. They were feeding just off the west coast of Bali, within the maritime boundary of Bali Barat National Park. On 13 December 1997 we observed a group of 15 probable Aleutian Terns and Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) fishing at the mouth of the Bone River, Gorontalo, Sulawesi. At the same time, about 200 unidentified terns were feeding offshore along the interface between the muddy river water and the clear sea.

We observed the flocks closely for 10–30 minutes, as two of the flocks of the birds often fed close to our boat. N.P.H. is familiar with the species on its breeding grounds and has observed it twice in Alaska and once in Siberia. Both of us are familiar with the black-billed race of Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo longipennis*), which the Aleutian Tern most resembles. All the birds we saw appeared to be adults in winter or near winter plumage with a sharply defined pattern of extensive white forehead, with white extending onto the crown of some individuals creating a bald-headed appearance. Some individuals had a black nape with whitish streaking in the upper edge of the black nape (for an example see photographs 6 and 10 in Kennerley and Ollington 1998). The wings and back were dark grey with a contrasting pale rump and tail. The bill was black on all the birds as were the legs of perched birds off the west coast of Java. Flight appeared to be slower than that of a Common Tern and feeding was accomplished more by dipping, similar to *Chlidonias* terns or the tropical Sooty and Bridled terns (*S. fuscata* and *S. anaethetus*). Unfortunately we did not take note of the underwing pattern which Kennerley and Ollington (1998) and Kennerley (pers. comm.) demonstrate to be a diagnostic field identification character for the Aleutian Tern in winter plumage.

While our records of the Aleutian Tern in Java, Bali and Sulawesi are not conclusive, we have presented our records here in order to draw attention to a possible wintering area for this species and to encourage field workers visiting Southeast Asia and Wallacea to be more diligent in their examination of tern flocks, especially from September to April. Our records of a probable Aleutian Tern in Indonesia together with previously published observations of this species elsewhere in Southeast Asia suggest that a significant proportion of the western Pacific population of Aleutian Tern migrates along the southern coast of China and Southeast Asia to winter in the islands of Indonesia and possibly the Philippines.

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