

RED-BILLED TROPICBIRDS
PHAETHON AETHEREUS
IN THE SOUTHEASTERN ATLANTIC OCEAN

LES G. UNDERHILL¹ & ALBERT CHIPPS²

Underhill L.G. & Chipps A. 2002. Red-billed Tropicbirds *Phaethon aethereus* in the southeastern Atlantic Ocean. *Atlantic Seabirds* 4(3): 115-118. Six records of Red-billed Tropicbirds *Phaethon aethereus* have been made in the southeastern sector of the Atlantic Ocean. Three were made during the austral summer 2000/01, including the first specimen record. Four of the six records were off the coast of South Africa and two off Namibia.

¹Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa, E-mail: lgu@maths.uct.ac.za; ²Smit Pentow Marine, PO Box 1339, Cape Town, 8000.

The Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* breeds on tropical islands in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992) and occurs in southern African waters as a vagrant (Ryan 1997). This short note reports details of the first specimen and reviews sight records of this species in the southeastern Atlantic Ocean, off Namibia and South Africa. The nearest breeding colony to southern Africa is at St Helena (15°55'S, 5°43'W) in the Atlantic Ocean (Rowlands *et al.* 1998).

An adult Red-billed Tropicbird circled around the deep-sea tug *John Ross* and the ship it was towing for an hour on 9 January 2001. During this period it made numerous abortive attempts to land; ultimately, it crashed exhausted on the deck of the tug. The tug was then at 32°41'S 15°30'E, 300 km northwest of Cape Town, and approximately 210 km offshore (Fig. 1, #5). The tropicbird was brought to Cape Town and sent to the rescue centre of the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). It died six days later and was found on post mortem to have a bacterial plug proximal to the bifurcation of the trachea. It weighed 750 g on arrival at SANCCOB. The wing-length was 325 mm, bill-length (exposed culmen) 63.6 mm, total head-length 125.9 mm, tarsus 30.3 mm, foot-length 81 mm; these measurements were taken as described by Baker (1993). The length of the single tail streamer, which was abraded, was 590 mm; the longest 'normal' tail feather was 135 mm. There was no primary moult.

There are currently six records of the Red-billed Tropicbird off southern Africa, three having been made in the austral summer 2000/01 (Table

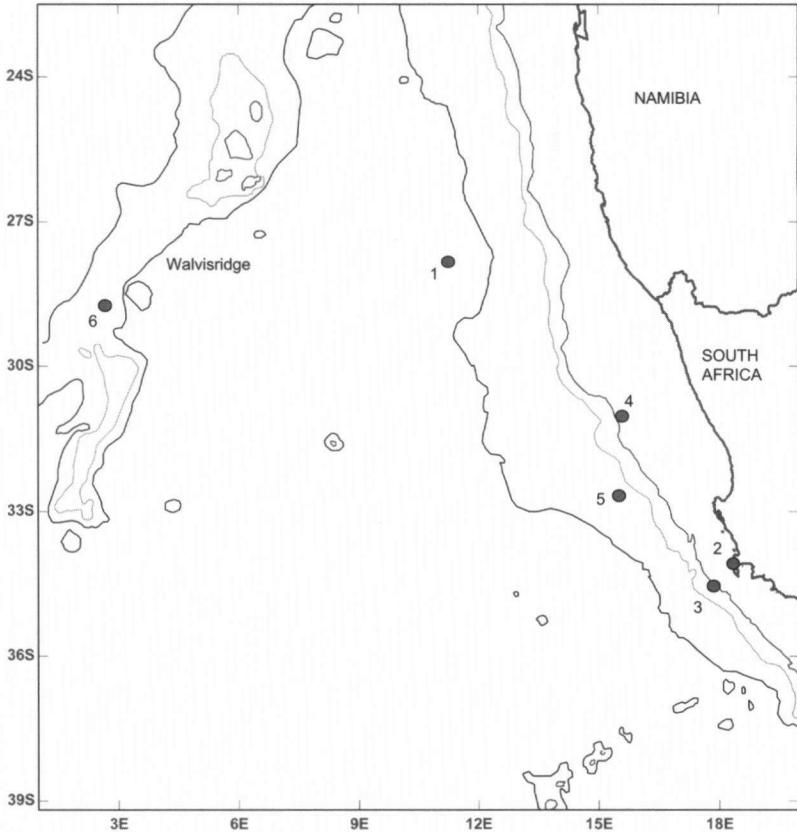


Figure 1. Localities where Red-billed Tropicbirds have been recorded in the southeastern Atlantic Ocean (see Table 1)

Figuur 1. Plaatsen waar Roodsnavelkeerringvogels in de zuidoostelijke Atlantische Oseaan zijn waargenomen (zie Tabel 1).

1; Fig. 1). Four were made off the coast of South Africa, the first having been seen and photographed close inshore from Chapman's Peak Drive on the Cape Peninsula in 1984. There are two records far offshore of the Namibian coast, made in 1972 and 2001. Although Angola is underexplored ornithologically, there are no records from the coastline of this country (Dean 2000). There are no records from Tristan da Cunha (Richardson 1984).

The specimen was of the nominate subspecies which breeds on islands of the Atlantic Ocean south of the equator. St Helena and Ascension Island are along the mid-Atlantic Ridge, and Abrolhos and Fernando de Noronha are

Table 1. Records of Red-billed Tropicbird in the southeastern Atlantic Ocean, off Namibia and South Africa.

Tabel 1. Meldingen van Roodsnavelkeerkringvogels in de zuidoostelijke Atlantische Oceaan, voor de kust van Namibië en Zuid-Afrika.

#	Place	Date	Distance to St Helena (km)	Distance offshore (km)	Reference
1	27°50'S 11°15'E	early Apr 1972 ¹	2190	420	Summerhayes <i>et al</i> 1974
2	34°05'S 18°21'E Chapman's Peak Drive, Cape Peninsula	25 Nov 1984	3190	<1	Schmidt 1986
3	34°33'S 17 52'E	9 Feb 1989	3130	55	Hockey <i>et al.</i> 1989; B. Rose <i>in litt.</i>
4	31°02'S 15°35'E	10 Dec 2000	2740	180	AC pers. obs.
5	32°41'S 15°30'E	9 Jan 2001	2830	210	AC pers. obs.
6	28°45'S 02°41'E	3 Feb 2001	2670	1270	C.J. Camphuysen <i>in litt.</i>

¹Summerhayes *et al.* (1974) provided no date for this record. However, the only occasion on which they were in the position given for the sighting was during a research cruise between 24 March and 8 April 1972, and a date in early April is the most likely.

offshore of Brazil (Antas 1991, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The total population of this subspecies on these islands is believed to be fewer than 3000 pairs (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Although this bird could have come from any of these islands, St Helena is the closest to the localities of the five records, and it is most likely that they originate from this island. The catalogue of sightings at sea of Red-billed Tropicbird off St Helena prepared by Rowlands *et al.* (1998) suggests that most records are within a radius of 400 km of the island. The records reported here are at distances between 2000 km and 3200 km from St Helena (Table 1).

Barrie Rose, Kees Camphuysen and Estelle van der Merwe provided additional information. Peter Ryan commented on a draft. LGU is supported by the South African National Research Foundation and the University of Cape Town Research Committee.

ROODSNAVELKEERKRINGVOGELS *PHAETHON AETHEREUS* IN DE ZUIDOOSTELIJKE ATLANTISCHE OCEAAN

In de zuidoostelijke sector van de Atlantische Oceaan, voor de kust van Zuid-Afrika en Namibië, werden tot dusverre zes maal Roodsnavelkeerkringvogels *Phaethon aethereus* gemeld. Drie van deze gevallen stammen uit de winter 2000/2001. Hieronder bevond zich het eerste verzamelde exemplaar. Aangenomen wordt dat de in dit gebied waargenomen keerkringvogels afkomstig zijn van de populatie op Sint Helena, 2000-3200 km noordelijk van de plaats van de waarnemingen. In figuur 1 en tabel 1 zijn alle gevallen weergegeven.

REFERENCES

- Antas P. de Tarso Zuquim. 1991. Status and conservation of seabirds breeding in Brazilian waters. In: Croxall J.P. (ed.) *Seabird status and conservation*. ICBP Technical Publication 11: 140-158. International Council for Bird Preservation, Cambridge.
- Baker K. 1993. Identification guide to European non-passerines. BTO Guide 24. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.
- Dean W.R.J. 2000. The birds of Angola. An annotated check-list. BOU Check-list 18. British Ornithologists' Union, Tring.
- Del Hoyo J., Elliott A. & Sargatal J. (eds). *Handbook of the birds of the world, 1*. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions
- Hockey P.A.R., Underhill L.G., Neatherway M. & Ryan P.G. 1989. Atlas of the birds of the southwestern Cape. Cape Bird Club, Cape Town.
- Richardson M.E. 1984. Aspects of the ornithology of the Tristan da Cunha Group and Gough Island, 1972-1974. *Cormorant* 12: 122-201.
- Rowlands B.W., Trueman T., Olson S.L., McCulloch N.M. & Brooke R.K. 1998. The birds of St Helena. An annotated check-list. BOU Check-list 16. British Ornithologists' Union, Tring.
- Ryan P.G. 1997. Redbilled Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*. In: Harrison J.A., Allan D.G., Underhill L.G., Herremans M., Tree A.J., Parker V. & Brown C.J. (eds) *The atlas of southern African birds, 1*: 762. BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg.
- Schmidt R.K. 1986. Redbilled Tropicbird at Hout Bay, Cape Peninsula: a new bird for the South African list. *Ostrich* 57: 244.
- Summerhayes C.P., Hofmeyr P.K. & Rioux R.H. 1974. Seabirds off the southwestern coast of Africa. *Ostrich* 45: 83-109.