

FIRST COASTAL RECORD OF THE WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *PHAETHON LEPTURUS* IN COSTA RICA

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ABSTRACT

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The White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* occurs in tropical oceans and is regularly recorded off the eastern coast of the United States and Mexico. In Costa Rica, the species is known from two records in the Pacific Ocean. Here, we present the first documented record of the species on the coast of continental Costa Rica. A single, after-first-cycle individual was observed flying north near Tortuguero, Costa Rica, on 12 April 2013. This is likely to be a wandering individual visiting the coast for feeding or a vagrant blown inland by high winds.

Key words: White-tailed Tropicbird, Costa Rica, new record

In Costa Rica, the White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* is known only from two records on Cocos Island in the Pacific Ocean, 550 km from the mainland (Dudzik 1996, Obando-Calderón *et al.* 2012). Here, we present details of the first documented occurrence of the species on the coast of continental Costa Rica.

The White-tailed Tropicbird is a pantropical species and the smallest member of the tropicbird family (Phaethonidae; Pennycuik *et al.* 1990, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992, Le Corre & Cebe 1999, Schreiber & Burger 2002). The species occurs in the western Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea as well as in the western Pacific Ocean from Japan to Australia and casually New Zealand, and in the Indian Ocean south to South Africa (AOU 1983, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The Bermuda and Caribbean subspecies *P. l. catesbyi* breeds throughout the Lesser Antilles. At some sites in higher latitudes, for instance in Bermuda, these White-tailed Tropicbirds are migratory (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992, Pennycuik *et al.* 1990). Otherwise, the species is considered both resident and

dispersive, with wandering behaviour known in both adults and juveniles, covering distances up to 1000 km (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Although mainly pelagic, it tends to frequent coasts more than other tropicbirds in certain areas (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). White-tailed Tropicbirds of the Bermuda/Caribbean subspecies are regularly recorded off the southeastern coast of the United States and to a lesser extent throughout the northern and eastern Gulf of Mexico (Lee & Walsh-McGehee 1998).

On 12 April 2013, one of us (Kas Koenraads) observed and photographed a single White-tailed Tropicbird from the gardens of the Hotel Vista Al Mar in San Francisco de Tortuguero, province of Limon, Costa Rica (10°35.82', 083°31.56'). The bird was spotted at 07h26, flying north approximately 100 m inland, over a pasture. Clearly, it was a large, white, tern-like bird with rapid wing beats and a very long, white tail; it also exhibited black tips on the primaries, a white back, and a black band over the median wing coverts (Fig. 1). The absence of any barring on the back and the

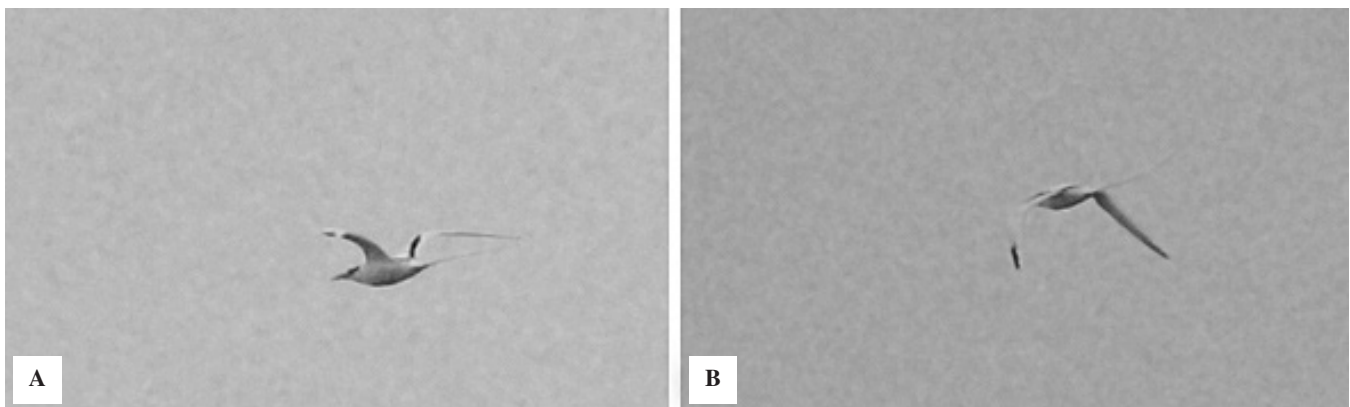


Fig. 1. *Phaethon lepturus* in San Francisco de Tortuguero, 12 April 2013; catalogue numbers MNCR-Z7836 (A), MNCR-Z7834 (B). Photos copyright Kas Koenraads.

long tail streamers indicated that the bird had undergone its first pre-basic moult (Pyle 2008) and, following the Wolfe *et al.* (2010) aging system as modified by Johnson *et al.* (2011), was considered an after-first-cycle bird. The Committee of Rare and Ornithological Records Costa Rica has processed and approved this record, and the species has subsequently been added to the Official List of the Birds of Costa Rica (Garrigues *et al.* 2015). However, the details of the record are published here for the first time. The photographs taken as evidence were received and listed by the National Museum of Costa Rica, Department of Natural History, with catalogue numbers MNCR-Z7832, MNCR-Z7833, MNCR-Z7834 (Fig. 1B), MNCR-Z7835, MNCR-Z7836 (Fig. 1A).

This is likely to be a wandering individual visiting the coast for feeding; its behaviour has been observed in both juvenile and adult White-tailed Tropicbirds (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Another possibility is that it was a vagrant blown inland by high winds, as documented in records of other species of seabirds in Costa Rica (Sandoval *et al.* 2008, Elizondo & Sandoval 2010). We recommend that other observers properly document and publish ancillary sightings of vagrant birds to help shed light on the fascinating behaviour of wandering individuals.

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