

# Red-billed Tropicbird: new to Britain

Sheila Blamire

**ABSTRACT** An adult Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* was seen and photographed by crew members of the yacht *Marg a Rita* in sea area Sole, 32 km SSE of the Isles of Scilly, on 7th June 2001. The circumstances of the record are described and discussed here. This individual constitutes the first record for Britain.

One afternoon in July 2001, I received a phone call from Roger Barnes, whom I had got to know at the Knutsford Ornithological Society (KOS) and more recently as a member of the Cheshire and Wirral Ornithological Society (CAWOS). This was no ordinary 'catching up on the news' call, however; I could immediately hear the excitement in his voice. He had just returned from a five-week cruise in his yacht *Marg a Rita*, a 32-foot Westerly Fulmar, a bilge-keeled sailing yacht. He had left New Quay, in Ceredigion, on Saturday 2nd June to travel to Belle-Île, in the Bay of Biscay, and back – a journey of some 1,900 km. Roger was, in his own words, 'the nearest thing on board to a birdwatcher'. As usual, he had taken photographs documenting his trip, which had now been developed. Among these prints he was very pleased to see that several 'grab' shots of a mystery 'tern-like' bird seen on the trip had come out reasonably well.

His first thought was to ring Jeff Clarke from CAWOS, who had recently run a 'Tern Identification Workshop'. Jeff thought that the bird sounded like a Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* from the description, but suggested that Roger show me the photographs to confirm the identification, since he knew that I had seen tropicbirds from various holiday destinations. I had first seen Red-billed Tropicbirds in the Galapagos, where it is not uncommon to see them soaring over the cliffs of islands such as South Plaza, Espanola, Genovesa, and North Seymour, and had also seen this species in Trinidad & Tobago. I had seen Red-tailed Tropicbirds *P. rubricauda* on Nosy Ve, off the south-

west coast of Madagascar, but White-tailed Tropicbird *P. lepturus* has so far eluded me. I must admit that I was expecting a few distant and probably blurred but, hopefully, 'record' shots of the bird in question. You can imagine my reaction when Roger brought them round, and there, staring me in the face, was a brilliant image of a stunning Red-billed Tropicbird!

I tried to convey the importance of the event to Roger, in that it was, potentially, the first proven record of a Red-billed Tropicbird in Britain and that, as such, the record would need to be fully documented and submitted to both BBRC and the BOU Records Committee for their assessment. Initially, Roger found it difficult to grasp that his word would not be sufficient and that he would need to provide evidence to back up his claims so that the record would stand the test of time and any future reviews. He was then subjected to the third degree: Exactly where was the bird seen? Could he prove the exact location? What entries were made in the *Yacht Log Book* (it is a requirement of the skipper to keep this up to date)? Furthermore, we needed to know the distance from land that was currently adopted as the outer limit for UK waters in terms of admission to the British List. I had no idea at the time. Finally, were there any doubts at all as to the identification? I would need to be absolutely 100% certain before we went any further. First of all, I asked Roger to describe in detail the events of that day in June 2001.

## Thursday 7th June 2001

It was 10.00 hrs on 7th June when the *Marg a Rita* left St Mary's, Scilly, for the passage

Roger Barnes



Roger Barnes



Roger Barnes



133-135. Adult Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*, sea area Sole, about 32 km SSE of Scilly, June 2001.  
The first record for Britain.

through the Chenal de la Helle to Dournenez, in Brittany. George Legg from New Quay was at the helm, Paul Fraser from Northwich was on look-out, Martin White from Manchester was below decks preparing lunch and Roger Barnes from Knutsford, the skipper, was sitting at the chart table trying to work out where they were and what the tide was doing to them. RB describes what happened next:

‘We were about 20 miles SSE of the Scillies when GL called us on deck to view an unusual-looking bird, the like of which he had never seen in all his years at sea. It hovered and flew in large circles around the boat. We thought on more than one occasion that it was contemplating landing on the boat; we have in the past had tired birds land on top of the mast, rest for a few hours, and then fly on. This one didn’t, however, but it stayed with us for about five minutes, coming close enough for us to get a good look and take some photographs.

‘The bird had the appearance and mannerisms of a large tern. I knew that it was not a European bird, or, to be more precise, it was not in my 1983 edition *Peterson’s Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. It flew between sea level and 100 feet in the air, hovering occasionally. What we immediately noticed was the very long tail (longer than the body), but we could not decide whether it comprised of one or two streamers. In brief, it was predominantly white with a large, blood-red bill, a conspicuous black eye-stripe, black on the wings towards the wing-tips and black feet.

‘While the others were watching the bird, I rushed below to change the lens on my camera. As I have only two, a 35-mm and 90-mm, the choice was not difficult! I put on the 90-mm lens, hoping that the bird would come close enough for me to get a good shot. I set the shutter speed at 1/1000th of a second, aperture to f2.8 and pre-set the distance at 30 feet. At the time, I was using up some old Kodak 200 ASA film. Fortunately the bird obliged and I managed to get one good shot. I use a Leica M6, which helps in these circumstances as the viewfinder has a larger field of view than the lens, and this made it easier to track the bird in flight.’ (see plates 133-135)

### Establishing the location

An index print of the film showed images of the Isles of Scilly before and France after the photographs taken of the mystery bird (plate 136). These, along with the *Yacht Log Book*, confirmed the locality of the sighting (fig. 1). Entries are updated in the log book approximately every hour and include time, course steered, barometer reading, latitude and longitude, distance to go to the next waypoint, and a narrative log. The important narrative entry made by MW against 13.00 hrs reads: ‘Sea bird. Ternish – long tail, b/r [bright- or blood-red?] beak’. At the top of the page, RB subsequently added: ‘Tern – v. long tail single streamer, black wing-tips, black feet, red bill, black eye-stripe’. There are various other scribbles added at a later date to this page, including ‘Red-billed



136. Index print of the film used to photograph Britain’s first Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*, showing Scilly at the start of the roll, and France at the end, with photos taken during the journey in between, including the tropicbird (9A-11A).

Tropicbird' once the bird was identified. The latitude and longitude at 13.00 hrs were recorded as 49°40'05"N 06°09'62"W, then 49°36'01"N 06°05'32"W at 14.00 hrs, so the approximate position at the time of the sighting was estimated to be 49°38'N 6°08'W. This placed the sighting in sea area Sole, about 32 km SSE of Scilly. The British List includes birds seen 'at sea' within the British Economic Zone, which now extends to 200 nautical miles (370 km) from the nearest point of land, so the sighting was well within this zone.

**Identification**

Even though I was quite sure of the identification, Red-billed Tropicbird is one of three closely related species in the genus *Phaethon*, so I still did my homework thoroughly, using the internet and various field guides as key reference sources. I also looked through photographs I had taken of tropicbirds over several holidays.

Tropicbirds are medium-sized seabirds, with a body roughly the size of a domestic pigeon, and a wedge-shaped tail with exceptionally long central tail feathers, or streamers, when adult; all three are essentially white, with a more or less conspicuous black mask through the eye.

When seen well, however, each species has diagnostic characters which make identification reasonably straightforward.

The upperparts and wing pattern in particular are usually diagnostic, even from a distance. On Red-billed Tropicbird, fine, blackish-grey barring on the mantle, back and rump extends onto the wing-coverts, with the innermost secondaries being solidly dark with white fringes. The outermost primaries and primary coverts are black, forming an obvious dark wedge on the leading edge of the outer wing, while the inner primaries and most of the secondaries are white. The upperwing of White-tailed Tropicbird also shows a black wedge on the outer primaries (although this does not extend onto the primary coverts), but differs markedly from that of the former species in having a striking black diagonal band across the inner wing (from the inner median coverts to the tertials). Finally, Red-tailed Tropicbird has the upperwing completely white except for black shafts to the outer primaries, and looks entirely white-winged in the field. All adult tropicbirds have elongated central tail feathers, which are lacking in juveniles, and the colour of the central tail-streamers in adults is an important character for identification.

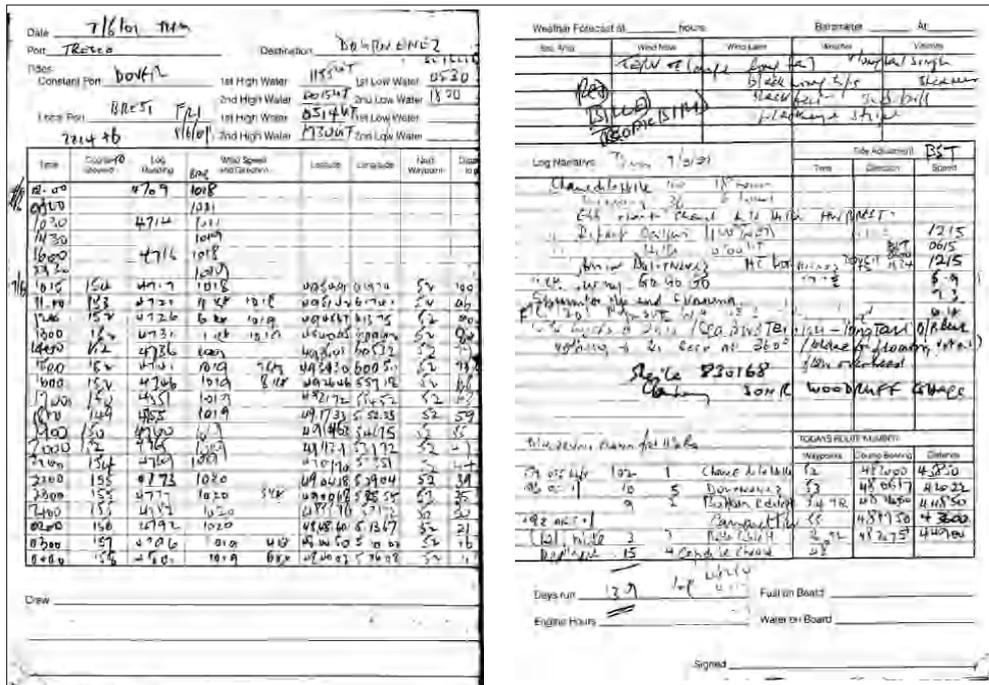


Fig. 1. Copies of the *Marg a Rita's* log book, showing entry at 13.00 hrs with basic details of Britain's first Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*.

These feathers, which form half the total length of the bird, are white in Red-billed and White-tailed Tropicbirds, and red in Red-tailed (although the red can sometimes be difficult to see, for example in bright light against a blue sky, making this species appear short-tailed). Bill colour is another key feature, being bright red in Red-billed (dull yellow in juveniles), yellow in White-tailed (dull yellow in juveniles), and red in Red-tailed adults (blackish in juveniles).

RB's photographs reveal a bird with a white head, conspicuous black mask and white body,

and black in the outer primaries and the innermost secondaries or tertiaries. As there were no shots of the bird from above, the pattern of the upperwings, and the degree of barring on the upperparts could not be judged. Nonetheless, the combination of long, white tail-streamers and blood-red bill establish the identity of the bird without any doubt as an adult Red-billed Tropicbird. The length of the two central tail feathers (they look as one in the field – explaining the initial confusion) look particularly long compared with the length of the body, so the bird was possibly a male.



Sheila Blamire



Sheila Blamire

137 & 138. Red-billed Tropicbirds *Phaethon aethereus*, Little Tobago, Trinidad & Tobago, December 1997.

### Distribution and status

Red-billed Tropicbirds breed in tropical and subtropical regions of the Atlantic, the eastern Pacific and the northwest Indian Ocean, together with the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, and are pelagic outside the breeding season (juveniles disperse widely, although adults are more sedentary, typically not straying far from breeding colonies). They are the least numerous of the three tropicbirds, with a population of around 10,000 pairs, most of which are on the coasts of Central America – about 1,000 pairs in the Gulf of California, several thousand pairs in the Galapagos, and over 1,600 pairs in the Caribbean (Enticott & Tipling 1997).

Within the Western Palearctic, Red-billed Tropicbirds breed regularly only on islands off Egypt – although the species is rare, with some tens of pairs maximum – and on the Cape Verde Islands – where breeding occurs on several islands, including Santiago, Brava, Ilhéus do Rombo and Razo, but the population continues to decline owing to human persecution and was not more than 100–125 pairs in 1988–93 (Snow & Perrins 1998). The species has also bred recently on the Azores (on an islet off Graciosa in 1993), and was suspected to do so in the Canary Islands (La Gomera, in 1988). In addition, Red-billed Tropicbird has been recorded as a vagrant off Portugal (see below), the Red Sea coasts of Israel and Kuwait, as well as Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Azores, while unidentified tropicbirds, probably this species, have been seen off northwest Africa (Morocco and Mauritania) (Snow & Perrins 1998). Just beyond the limits of the Western Palearctic, small numbers also breed on Isle de Madeleine, a small island off the coast of Senegal. Northward vagrancy or dispersion from the breeding areas has been reported along the eastern seaboard of the USA north to Nova Scotia, Canada.

The Cape Verde population belongs to the race *mesonauta*, which has a rosy tinge in fresh plumage, bold black eye-stripe, and other dark areas of the upperparts and flight feathers appear blacker than on the other two races. Nominate *aethereus* has the dark bars on the upperparts and the dark areas of the primaries and secondaries paler and more grey than those of *mesonauta*. The race *indicus*, which occurs in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, is smaller than the other two races, with a reduced

black stripe through the eye and a more orange-toned bill. Although the bird seen from the *Marg a Rita* could not be assigned to a particular subspecies with certainty, it was considered to be probably of the race *mesonauta* which, as well as breeding on Cape Verde and off Senegal, nests in the Caribbean and in the eastern Pacific.

### Records of Red-billed Tropicbirds in Europe

Prior to the record discussed here, the only acceptable record of Red-billed Tropicbird in western Europe was of one at sea, 162 km due west of Portugal on 13th August 1988 (Moore 1990; Knox 1994). Other records have involved tideline corpses, including a fresh immature male in The Netherlands on 27th January 1985 (Bruinzeel 1986), and a probable immature female of the race *indicus* at Landguard Point, Suffolk, on 17th February 1993 (Knox *et al.* 1994). The latter was found close to the container port of Felixstowe; Knox *et al.* (1994) suggested that the bird most likely landed aboard a container ship in the Red Sea and subsequently died, and that the body was either dumped or washed overboard in or near Felixstowe. The identity of one found dead near Malvern, Hereford & Worcester, in about 1854, and now in Norwich Castle Museum, is not in doubt, but the provenance of this record is considered unproven by BOURC (Knox 1994).

Following the sighting from the *Marg a Rita*, another (or the same) Red-billed Tropicbird was seen off Jaonneuse, Guernsey, on 16th September 2001 (Rogers *et al.* 2002). Then, on 29th March 2002, one was seen from the M. V. *Scillonian*, about 6.5 km east of the Isles of Scilly, and another (or perhaps the same individual) was reported by three observers about 1.5 km off The Lizard, Cornwall, less than a month afterwards, on 21st April 2002 (Rogers *et al.* 2003). As stated by Rogers *et al.* 2003, if no more follow for a number of years, the statistical significance of this cluster will need to be considered – implying that if there are no more records for some time, then perhaps these four sightings should be attributed to just one or two individuals.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank Roger Barnes for giving me the opportunity to get involved in this historic record and for his 'innocent' question to me one day: 'Have you ever found a 'first' for Britain, Sheila?' the recollection of which never fails to amuse, if not frustrate, me!

## References

- Bruinzeel, L.W. 1986. Roodsnavelkeerkringvogel bij Egmond aan Zee in Januari 1985. *Dutch Birding* 8: 45-48.
- Enticott, J., & Tipling, D. 1997. *A Photographic Handbook of the Seabirds of the World*. New Holland, London.
- Knox, A. 1994. Claimed occurrences of Red-billed Tropicbird in Britain. *Brit. Birds* 87: 480-487.
- , Mendel, H., & Odin, N. 1994. Red-billed Tropicbird in Suffolk. *Brit. Birds* 87: 488-491.
- Moore, C. C. 1990. Red-billed Tropicbird off Portugal in August 1988. *Dutch Birding* 12: 12-14.
- Rogers, M. J., & the Rarities Committee. 2002. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2001. *Brit. Birds* 95: 476-528.
- & — 2003. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2002. *Brit. Birds* 96: 542-609.
- Snow, D.W., & Perrins, C. M. (eds) 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Concise edition. Vol. 1. OUP, Oxford.

Sheila Blamire

Woodruff Cottage, Clamhunger Lane, Mere, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 6QG



EDITORIAL COMMENT Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee commented: 'A fantastic tale that, once again, shows the potential for pelagic trips in British waters. These remarkable photographs prove that this is indeed an adult, or near-adult, Red-billed Tropicbird, and the entry in the log book firmly places it well within British waters. Although it is not possible to assign this individual to a particular subspecies, the blood-red bill and broad black streak through the eye appear to eliminate the race *indicus*, in which the bill averages slightly more orange with black cutting edges, and the eye-streak is less well developed behind the eye. Separation of *mesonauta*, breeding both in the Caribbean and around the Cape Verde Islands, from the nominate form is difficult, and relies on careful examination of the width and intensity of the black mantle-barring. The only confusion species was White-tailed Tropicbird, which was readily eliminated by the pattern of black in the outer primaries, absence of black carpal bar and bill colour.'

Eric Meek, Chairman of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, commented: 'A truly exciting addition to the British List – and a relatively straightforward one for the BOURC! The photographic evidence left no doubt as to the identification to species level, so the only major question that remained was the authenticity of that evidence. The co-ordinates of the sighting had been recorded in the yacht's log and, once the contact prints had been examined and seen to show the images of the bird falling neatly between recognisable landscapes in both Scilly and France, the committee had no hesitation in accepting this as a British "first". The only slight doubts related to the race involved, *mesonauta* being considered most likely but not proven. Increasing sea temperatures around Britain seems a likely reason for an occurrence such as this and it remains to be seen what further species may occur in British waters as a result of that process.'