

THE RED-BILLED TROPIC-BIRD

By R. P. FFRENCH

Around the coasts and islands of Tobago can be seen at most times of the year tropic-birds of the genus *Phaethon*. In this article the writer hopes to clear up some discrepancies in the existing literature on the ornithology of Tobago.

Belcher and Smooker, Junge and Mees, and Devas all concur that the bird to be found in these parts is *Phaethon lepturus*—the Yellow-billed Tropic-bird. It seems possible that both the latter authorities were following Belcher and Smooker, whose identification of the species was based on that of de Dalmas at an earlier date. But Lewis Brown took it for granted that the bird was *Phaethon aethereus*—the Red-billed Tropic-bird—, and his photographs go some way to substantiate this view, which the present writer holds to be correct.

DIAGNOSTIC FEATURES

From a study of descriptions and pictures in Bond, Voous, Alexander, Murphy, Blake, and Peterson, it seems plain that the patterning of the plumage rather than the colour of the bill is the diagnostic feature between the two species. The Yellow-billed Tropic-bird is distinguished by a broad black band across the median coverts, scapulars and innermost secondaries. The rest of the upper parts are substantially pure white. The bill of the adult is variously described as coral or vermilion red; only the juvenile has a yellow bill. The Red-billed Tropic-bird is a more robust bird, though not much longer. It has no black band on the upper parts, but instead the entire back, mantle, rump, proximal wing coverts and sides of neck are white transversely barred with black, forming

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group, not found on the other local savannas, but very characteristic of the hill savannas of Venezuela.

A detailed study of these various natural savannas would make a very interesting hobby for an enthusiastic botanist. The problems presented are intriguing, the extent of their floristic composition is relatively small, and the areas are fairly accessible even to a none-too adventurous searcher. And any would-be enthusiast might well be advised to hurry with his work, because several of the areas mentioned are being rapidly transformed to make way for various schemes of agricultural, industrial and housing developments.

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a chequered effect. The bill of the adult is crimson, whilst the immature of this species too has a yellow bill.

The writer has found occupied nests of the tropic-birds on St. Giles Is., Little Tobago, and Smith's Is., and in every case the birds have been unquestionably Red-billed. Many birds around these islands have been studied, but, whilst the bills have occasionally varied in colour (presumably due to the age of the individual), not one bird has been seen which fits the description of a Yellow-billed. An adult of the latter species was seen at sea near Bermuda, and the black band on the upper parts was immediately noticeable; the bill was described as coral red.

It seems thus that the only birds difficult to distinguish in the field are the immature birds of either species, which are anyway marked out by the absence of the long tail streamers.

Sources:—Belcher and Smooker. *The Ibis*. 1934:

Junge and Mees. *The Avifauna of Trinidad & Tobago*. 1958.

Devas. *Visitor's Book of Birds, Trinidad & Tobago*. 1950.

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Blake. *Birds of Mexico*. 1953.

Peterson. *Field Guide to the Birds*. 1947.

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