

Noteworthy Bird Records for Trinidad & Tobago, 1993-1994

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present new data on the status of 13 species of birds in Trinidad and Tobago. One species is reported for the first time in both the Gulf of Paria and near Tobago, another species is reported for the first time for Little Tobago, and a third species is reported breeding for the first time in Tobago. New extreme migration dates are provided for four species of migrants from North America, two from South America, and one from the South Atlantic. Additional records are reported for four species seldom recorded from both islands. The data are based primarily on my own observations, with one exception, while resident in the country, from September 1993 through December 1994.

Species Accounts

Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*

Although this species has been recorded breeding in Trinidad, its status as a breeding resident in Tobago has been suspected but not previously confirmed (ffrench 1985, 1991). In a brackish lagoon at Buccoo, Tobago I observed up to three adults during 9-14 July 1994; on 6 November 1994, I observed four young birds (each with whitish stripes on the head) swimming in the lagoon.

Greater Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*

While aboard the M.V. Panorama (inter-island ferry) on 3 July 1994, I observed a single shearwater of this species in the Gulf of Paria approximately one kilometre south of Carenage, Trinidad, at 11.30 hr. I observed it through 7x35 binoculars for about 30 seconds as it flew westward alongside the ship at a distance of about 100 metres. The ocean surface was calm, permitting excellent viewing conditions. I wrote in my field notes: 'white collar behind neck, white rump patch, white underparts, white underwing linings, brown above,' and later added 'contrast on neck' between dark cap and white cheeks. An unidentified dolphin (possibly more than one) was seen nearby a minute earlier, but I do not know if the shearwater was associating with it. Later that day, at 16.05 hr, I briefly viewed a second Greater Shearwater approximately 1 km south of Crown Point, Tobago. I observed the bird through binoculars for about 15 sec as it flew westward alongside the ship at a distance of about 150 m. When it banked southward and flew away from the ship, I noted a distinct white crescent on its rump, indicating that it was a Greater Shearwater. I briefly observed another shearwater a few minutes earlier, but was unable to identify it. The swells were 1-2 m high, precluding more detailed observations. I have seen this species previously off the coast of Maryland, USA. There are numerous records of this species from the east coast of Trinidad during the month of June (Collins and Tikasingh, 1974, ffrench, 1991) However these sightings represent the first records for the Gulf of Paria and Tobago, respectively, and the latest

migration date for northbound migrants of this South Atlantic species. Nevertheless, owing to the brevity of my observations of the Tobago bird and my inability to view all of the distinguishing field marks, the Tobago record should be regarded as hypothetical even though I feel confident of the identification.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*

While aboard the M.V. Panorama on 3 July 1994, I observed a single tropicbird through binoculars at 13.25 hr as it flew eastward approximately 2 km north of the northern coast of Trinidad. The bird had a long white tail, indicating that it was an adult, and its reddish bill, blackish upper primaries and absence of black on the scapulars, indicated that it belonged to this species. There appear to be only two previous records for Trinidad: one seen a few kilometres off the north coast on 23 April 1983 (ffrench, 1985), and a dead bird found at Manzanilla Bay in February 1987 (ffrench, 1991).

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

On 23 December 1993, I observed (with B. Wong) a Little Egret through binoculars and a telescope from 16.45 hr to 17.15 hr at a construction site just north of Bon Accord, Tobago. On 7 November 1994, I photographed another Little Egret at Speyside, Tobago. I observed it (with M. Arct, K. and M. Hayes) through binoculars and a telescope, from 09.50 hr to 09.55 hr at a salt marsh on the south side of town, and from 17.50 hr to 17.55 hr along a stream at the entrance to Blue Waters Inn. Both birds were white-phased individuals in non-breeding plumage. They were distinguished from the similar Snowy Egret, *E. thula*, by the presence of a bluish-grey cere between the eye and bill, which is yellowish in the Snowy Egret. The base of the lower bill was slightly paler on both birds. No Snowy Egrets were present on either occasion. Murphy (1992) cited three previous records of this Old World species for Tobago, all at Buccoo during 1990 and 1991.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*

On 7 November 1994, at about 10.30 hr, I observed the bird through binoculars for about 30 sec before it flew directly away from me at eye-level, permitting views of the greenish speculum on the trailing edge of the wing, but not the bluish patches on the scapulars. I suspect that it was the same individual that I had flushed (and photographed) in nearby Speyside, Tobago, about 35 min earlier. This appears to be the first record of this species for Little Tobago, which is basically devoid of freshwater wetlands. Nevertheless, once again, owing to the brevity of my observation and my inability to view all of the distinguishing field marks, this record should be regarded as hypothetical even though I feel confident of the identification. Dinsmore (1972) did not record any ducks during his survey of the avifauna of Little Tobago.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*

On 11 July 1994, I observed a single bird on the edge of a brackish lagoon at Buccoo, Tobago. This record represents the earliest migration date for southbound migrants of this North American species; previously ffrench (1991) reported the earliest date as 12 July.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*.

On 10 July 1994, I observed seven birds on the beach at Buccoo, Tobago. This date represents the earliest migration date for southbound migrants of this North American species; ffrench (1991) did not list any records for June, July or August, but stated that some birds are probably present throughout the year.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*.

I observed a single bird on the margin of a brackish lagoon at Buccoo, Tobago, on 14 July 1994. This record represents the earliest migration date for southbound migrants of this North American species; ffrench (1991) stated that the earliest record was from late July.

Common Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

I took numerous photographs of an adult gull with a chocolate-brown hood, between Store Bay and Pigeon Point, Tobago, during 4-14 July 1994. The Brown-hooded Gull (*L. maculipennis*) of southern South America is similar, differing primarily in having white rather than black tips to the primaries (Harrison 1983). The worn wing tips of this particular individual were nearly all white, with only a minute black speck (1-2 mm long) at the tip of the outermost three primaries and a subapical black spot (about 5 mm long) present only on the leading edge (outer vane) of the outermost primary. Although this particular individual strongly resembles a Brown-hooded Gull, which has been reported but not confirmed for Tobago (ffrench 1991), the presence of a chocolate-brown hood, which occurs only during the breeding season, indicates that the bird was a Common Black-headed Gull because a Brown-hooded Gull would be in winter plumage during July. There are numerous records of this chiefly Palearctic species for both islands (ffrench 1991).

Yellow-billed Tern *Sterna superciliaris*.

I observed three birds at the Trincity sewage ponds, Trinidad, on 11 December 1994, and (with R. Trecartin) a single bird at the same locality on 21 December 1994. These records represent the first for the month of December and the latest dates for Trinidad of this South American visitor; ffrench (1991) reported that the previous late date was 26 November.

Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*.

On 26 November 1993, S. Miller and C. Dengler (pers. comm.; Arlington, MA., USA) observed a single bird at Caroni Swamp, Trinidad. This represents the latest date for Trinidad of this occasionally breeding South American species; ffrench (1991) reported that the previous latest date was 17 November.

Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*.

I observed a single bird at the edge of a brackish lagoon near Buccoo, Tobago, on 9 and 10 July 1994. I obtained several photographs of the bird, which clearly showed the distinguishing characters of this species; the identification was independently confirmed by R. ffrench (in litt.). A search for

the bird and its nest on 11 July was fruitless. There are only four previous sight records of this rare species from Tobago (ffrench 1991, 1993); the present record represents the first documented by a photograph. It remains uncertain whether the species is resident, as it is in Trinidad (ffrench 1991), or merely a visitor in Tobago.

Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*.

On 1 October 1994, I observed (with H. Munson and R. Stacy) a single individual associating with migrant Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* at the Trincity sewage ponds, from 09.50 hr to 09.55 hr. We viewed the bird from as close as 5 m, and clearly saw the distinct brownish collar across the chest, which distinguishes this species from all other swallows. This record represents the earliest date for southbound migrants of this North American species; ffrench (1991) stated that there were only a few sight records for Trinidad, between the dates of 28 December and 24 April.

Acknowledgements

I thank R. ffrench for discussing several of these records, C. Collins for providing pertinent literature, and S. Miller for informing me of his observations. Two of my trips to Tobago were paid for by the Department of Biology of the Caribbean Union College. M. Arct, K. Hayes, H. Munson, R. Stacy, R. Trecartin, B. Wong, and several students from Caribbean Union College shared some of these observations with me.

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