

## An amazing message from India

Posted on [August 1, 2020](#) by [chrisfeare](#)

On 27 July I received a very brief email with a heading in Indian script, which was unintelligible to me; the accompanying message read simply “Hi...I am range forest officer ....I got one of the wild bird nearer to Mumbai which was radio collared”. End of message – I was mystified!

About six hours later I received another message, from Dr. Suresh Kumar, of the Department of Endangered Species Management at the Wildlife Institute of India, saying that a Sooty Tern had been recovered near Mumbai, and that bird had a satellite transmitter and a leg ring. Further information, and some photographs, have been sent subsequently by Vijay Rambhau Barabde, Range Forest Officer at Lion Safari Park and Rescue Centre, Sanjay Gandhi National Park near Mumbai and Dr. Raju Kasambe, Assistant Director – Education, Conservation Education Centre (CEC), Bombay Natural History Society. The finding has created a lot of interest as the Sooty Tern is regarded as a rare bird in north-west India, and the recovery has been prominently reported in the Hindustan Times newspaper. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/seabird-travels-from-seychelles-to-mumbai-dies-of-exhaustion/story-LAk7yLgKArgxFdes6iC4oK.html>



The young Sooty Tern, with the Microwave Telemetry Inc. satellite transmitter after removal

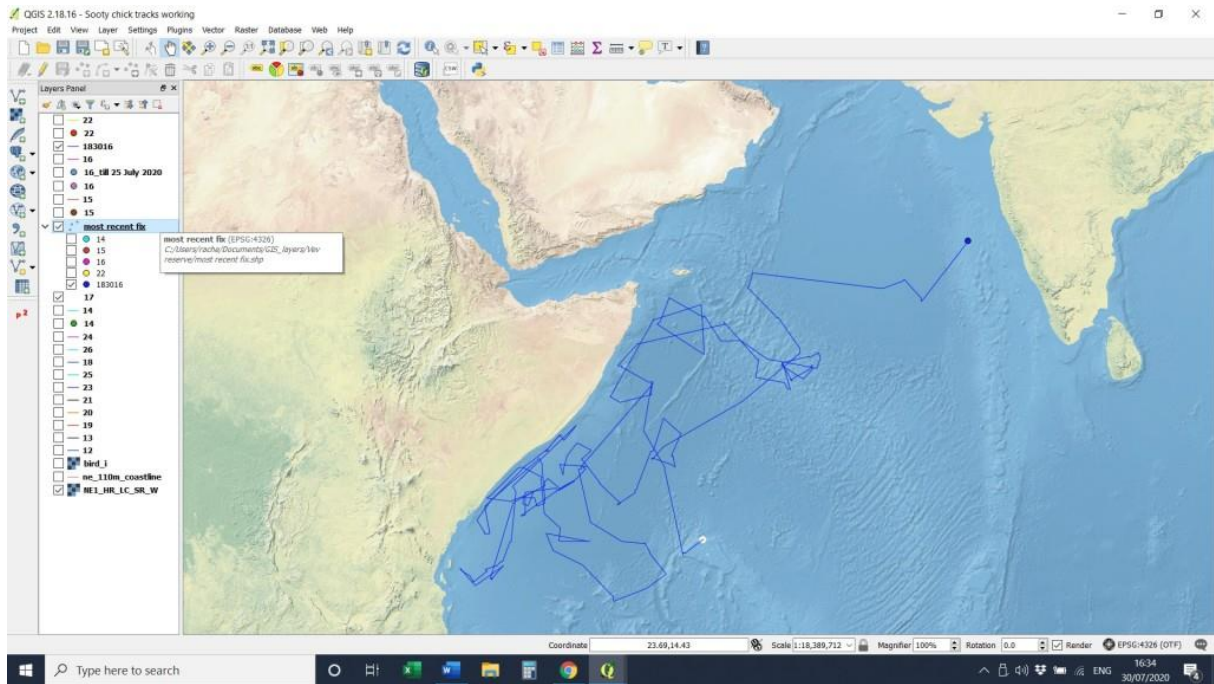


from the bird Animal Rescue officer Mr Vaibhav Patil and Forest Range Officer Vijay Rambhau Barabde with the young Sooty Tern. The wing feathers are black, as are most of the back feathers, although the upper back feathers have pale fringes.

The Sooty Tern was found alive, but unable to fly, by a villager, about 40 km north of Mumbai and about 5 km inland. Prompted by the attached transmitter and ring, the villager took the bird to the local police, who passed it to the Forest Range Office in Tungreshwar. In light of its poor condition it was sent to Vijay Rambhau Barabde, Range Forest Officer in Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Borivali, Mumbai, who also leads an animal Rescue Centre. Their veterinarians examined the bird, concluding that it had no injuries but was suffering from exhaustion (weighing only 125 grams; when the tag was attached in August 2019 it weighed 187 grams). The transmitter details and ring number were sent to Suresh Kumar, as he is known to have experience of satellite transmitters through his well-known study of the migration of Amur Falcons across the northern Indian Ocean and onwards to South Africa. The transmitters that he had used were the same as the one on our Sooty Tern, manufactured by Microwave Telemetry Inc. in the United States; on its underside the tag had my email address, leading to Suresh's contacting me with the details and photographs.

This Sooty Tern was one of the fifteen juveniles that Rachel Bristol, Christine Larose and I had marked on Bird Island, Seychelles, in August 2019 during our SeyCCAT-funded project (see earlier 2019 blogs) aimed at discovering where juveniles fed during the first months of their lives at sea. Like all the other tagged birds, this one had initially flown north towards the vicinity of the Coco-de-Mer ridge. It then spent its subsequent time meandering around the north-western Indian Ocean off the coasts of Somalia, Kenya and northern Tanzania, covering thousands of kilometres. By 13 July, it was in the north of this region, about 450 km east of Socotra Island. Thereafter, it headed eastwards towards India and our last record of it at sea was 25 July, when it was about 300 km from the Indian coast. It had made its way eastwards in easterly-blowing monsoon winds, and weather maps showed storms off the

Indian coast. Under these conditions it appears to have been unable to feed, and it was so weakened that it died in captivity on 29 July.



The track of the recovered juvenile Sooty Tern following its departure from Bird Island (white dot) in late August 2019, up to its last observed location off India's west coast on 25 August 2020 (blue dot). Two days later it was discovered on the ground to the north of Mumbai. Its final eastward journey across the Arabian Sea and to its point of recovery was about 1800 kilometres in a direct line and took 14 days. Thanks to Rachel Bristol for producing the map.

Its story created considerable interest in India, however, and its remains will be mounted as a museum feature to be on permanent display, with its leg ring, as an educational exhibit.

In addition to its remarkable journey and chance-in-a-million recovery, the photographs are of particular interest because very little is known of the rate of change from the largely dark grey, with white spotting, of the juveniles to the black upperparts and white underparts and forehead of the adult Sooty Tern. We know that this young bird was eleven months old when found and it had largely lost the white spotting on its upperparts but pale tips are visible the feathers of the upper back. Its open wing showed that it was in the process of moulting its primary feathers (on the left wing a newly growing feather can be seen in a gap between the longer feathers). The forehead and chin are paler grey but not yet white, while a photograph of the underparts suggests that the feathers were smoky grey; however, the breast, belly and underwings appeared wet in the photograph and their colour cannot be described with certainty.





Above, dorsal view showing the black back and upper wing, with a small growing feather within a gap in the primary (flight) feathers, indicating that the bird was moulting. Lower, ventral view showing the smoky-grey appearance of the underwing and belly feathers.



juvenile Sooty Tern on Bird Island on the point of fledging

Warm thanks go to all the Indian people who have contributed to finding and reporting details of this Sooty Tern, for taking photographs and for their patience in answering my questions.