

## Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichi* : The First Record for Seychelles

Frankie E. Hobro<sup>a</sup> and Teresa Catry<sup>b</sup>

### Introduction

On 29 August 2005 at 12:30 pm on the southern beach of Aride Island Nature Reserve, the most northerly of the granitic islands in Seychelles, Frankie Hobro (FH) the island Science and Administration Officer, and Teresa Catry (TC) a visiting researcher, were at the Western edge of the boatshed when they sighted a large and unusual bird on the beach approximately 30m to the West. The solitary bird was wandering towards the tide line on the lower beach amongst the Brown and Lesser Noddies (*Anous stolidus*, and *A. tenuirostris*). The individual was larger and considerably stockier than the species around it on the beach and it had a very distinct dark head and back. FH and TC both recognised it immediately as some kind of gull, being familiar with several other species of gull from Europe and elsewhere.

Upon closer observation through binoculars, the distinctive features of the gull were noted, in particular the white eye ring and red tip to the bill, which was otherwise yellow, and the pale collar, which did not extend to its breast, but stopped either side of the throat. Confirmation of identification as a Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichi* was then made by reference to guide books. Aride ranger Francis Salomon (FS) and volunteer George Stoye (GS), who briefly observed the bird when it was initially sighted, both agreed with the identification.

The same bird was briefly located later the same day at the Western end of the Aride beach between 14.00 and 15.00. Unfortunately, before a photograph could be taken, the bird flew off in an Easterly direction and was not seen again. As the bird left, its tail was visible and was clearly completely white from above, contrasting starkly with the dark band across the back and wings, further confirming its identification. A record form was then sent to Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC) to report the sighting.

### Description and Identification

Mostly sooty brown, with white crescent above and smaller, fainter crescent below eye, hind neck white, extending to either side of the throat. Upperparts and back brownish grey, rump and upper tail coverts white. Under parts mostly white. Black hood on head, extending to a bib, over a grey breast. Wings mostly sooty brown, with black tips to the primaries and a white trailing edge. The bird appeared to be an adult in full breeding plumage since the colours were distinctive, not dull as they appear on non-breeding adults (Löfgren 1984). Distinguished from the adult Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*, the only small gull known to occur in the Seychelles (Skerrett *et al.*) by its yellow legs and bill, and darker back (Maclean 1993), and from the larger Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* adult in spring plumage by its much darker back and breast, and the fact that the hood extended down the breast to form a bib (Harrison 1985).

### Status and Distribution

Present off the Arabian Coast throughout the year, with many migrating South to Kenya and Tanzania, with peak figures during October-May (Harrison 1985). Breeds in the Southern Red Sea from Jeddah to the Gulf of Aden, locally along the coast of East Somalia to Kenya, and the Persian Gulf. Egg laying occurs around July-August (Meinertzhagen 1954), which may explain the presence of this adult in full breeding plumage during August. Abundant off South East Arabia, with large flocks of several thousands off Oman during June-August (Bailey 1966) providing another possible source of this individual further South into the Indian Ocean during this season.

### **First Accepted Record**

The record of this sighting has been accepted by the SBRC as the first for Seychelles.

### **References**

- Bailey, R.S. 1966. The sea birds of the south coast of Arabia. *Ibis* 108: 224-264.
- Harrison, P. 1985. *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Revised Edition. A & C Black Publishers Ltd.
- Löfgren, L. 1984. *Ocean Birds*. Crescent Books, New York.
- Maclean, G.L. 1993. *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*. Sixth edition. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.
- Meinertzhagen, R. 1954. *The Birds of Arabia*. Edinburgh Press.
- Skerrett, A., Bullock, I. and Disley, T. 2001. *Birds of the Seychelles*. A & C Black Publishers Ltd.
- <sup>a</sup> Cousine Island Ecology, P.O. Box 977, Victoria, Mahe, Seychelles
- <sup>b</sup> Institute of Marine Research, University of Coimbra, Portugal