

**SHORT COMMUNICATIONS**

**FURTHER RECORDS OF MASKED BOOBY *SULA DACTYLATRA MELANOPS* HEUGLIN (PELICANIFORMES : SULIDAE) FROM KERALA**

There have been occasional reports of encountering the sea bird Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra melanops* Heuglin along the Western seaboard of India, Pakistan and also in the adjacent islands of Sri Lanka (Ali and Ripley, 1983) and Maldives (Phillips, 1947). Masked booby is a pelagic bird normally ranging in the south-western Indian Ocean, and having its easterly distributional limit in the seas off Sind and Makran (Baluchistan) coasts. Birds reported from India and elsewhere outside the normal range are believed to be stray individuals which have been carried away by monsoon gales and winds. Among such records of masked booby occurrences in the west coast of India, the only record so far from the Kerala coast is that of one from Cannanore mentioned by Ali and Ripley (1983). However, these authors have not given the specific reference of the published report of this record, and a literature search for it failed to find any.

Being so, it is of interest to report that two masked booby birds were caught recently from near Calicut, one in the last week of July and the other in the middle of August, 1987. The former was caught at sea about 10 km offshore from Kadalundi river estuary and the latter from inland at Beypore, ca 5 km from sea shore. The one that was caught the first time landed on a mechanised boat engaged in fishing in the open sea and behaved very tamely. The second bird captured inland also did not offer any resistance when caught. Infact, boobies are said to lack any sense of fear of man and they not only fly alongside ships to catch fish which shoot up from the wake of the ships, but also land on the vessels and sit quietly, lending themselves to be grabbed by the sailors (Adley, 1979). The first bird was released back into the sea, and the other whose flight muscles were slightly injured was kept for a few days at the Western Ghat Regional Station of Zoological Survey of India and later sent to Trichur Zoological Gardens. So far as is known, this is the southernmost record of occurrence of this species in the Indian mainland.

The bird in captivity consumed large amount of fish. In the first few days about a kilogram of fish per day was eaten, but obviously it could do with more. Sardines and similar fishes of even about 15 cm in length were snapped up and swallowed wholly. Like in pelicans and allied species, the great digestive power of the bird for dissolving even the bones was evident in the liquid nature of the excreta which was ejected in a jet-stream to a distance of about half-a-metre behind. In a short time, the bird plasters the floor of the cage with this whitish sticky excreta. It is no wonder that a small island off the coast of Peru is said to be entirely made up of the casting from huge colonies of this bird (Murphy, 1936).

The only sound produced by the bird is similar to that of ducks, but was heard only in context of some alarm. Jackals which either sensed the presence or heard its call used to visit the campus during nights and seeing them the bird called even more.

The first bird was perhaps slightly immature as it had dark-brownish blotches on the back of the neck and on the outer white upper half of the wings, whereas the other one was uniformly whitish on these parts. Bills and legs including the web were blue-grey. Accompanying photograph is that of the second bird observed in captivity and now kept in Trichur Zoological Gardens.

As a postscript it may be added here that subsequent to the preparation to this note and while it was under publication, another masked booby bird was caught at nearly the same area in Beypore during August, 1988.

#### REFERENCES

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