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## **Some Tern Observations in North Queensland**

By R. A. NOSKE, Northwood, New South Wales.

During a five week trip to Queensland, Richard Johnstone and I spent four days, January 11-14, 1972, in the Cairns region. Not many bird observers, we were assured, came here at this time of the year, as January is normally the beginning of the "wet" or monsoon season, when continual rain and unpleasant conditions make bird watching very difficult. Thunder-storms occur from December to mid-January, the monsoon usually from late January to the end of March. Cyclones, however, can occur as early as December, and this year saw the extremely savage cyclone "Althea", followed by rain depressions over most of the State. We had missed the cyclone, but we saw the damage it had done in and around Townsville.

Despite these warnings, and bad weather beforehand, we continued northward, and were fortunate in having fine weather for most of the time that we spent in this part of north Queensland. In fact, we found this time of the year, at least in 1972, extraordinarily good, particularly so in the case of the terns.

The Cairns region is an excellent area in which to study terns. Of the 21 known species to have been recorded in Australian waters, 13 or 14 occur here; the 14th being the White-capped Noddy for which I cannot find any previous published records. Two species can be regarded as inland rather than coastal birds, leaving 12 species within the area we studied.

We recorded nine species of tern while we were there, two notable absentees being the Caspian and Gull-billed Terns, and the third species being the Common Tern. This latter species appears to have been recorded only in the months of October to December.

Three of the best places to study terns in the Cairns region are the Cairns foreshore, Green Island and Michaelmas Cay. Situated approximately 40 km N.N.E. of Cairns, Michaelmas Cay is a very small and low, sandy, reef-island, yet it is one of the best places in eastern Australia to observe terns.

Although the Cay is a well-known breeding station for terns, and has fairly easy access, I cannot find any published lists or papers, other than a few scattered records, of the birds to be found there, especially in summer.

We recorded seven species of tern on the island, which were present in large to small numbers, in the following sequence. Sooty Tern, *Sterna fuscata*, "thousands"; Common Noddy, *Anous stolidus*,

over 1,000; Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii*, less than 1,000; Lesser Crested Tern, *S. bengalensis*, over 100, probably hundreds; Black-naped Tern, *S. sumatrana*, less than 100; White-capped Noddy, *Anous minutus*, four seen; and Bridled Tern, *Sterna anaetheta*, two or three definitely observed.

The first four of these species have been known to breed at the Cay for a long time; some of the first notes that I can find being those of S. R. White (*Emu*, 46: 91-92). We found the first three species breeding, and the fourth quite obviously just after breeding. We also found considerable evidence to suggest that the White-capped Noddy breeds there also, or did at least that year.

#### Black-naped Tern, *Sterna sumatrana*.

This species was comparatively common in the Cairns region while we were there, sixty-five birds were counted on a little sandspit at Green Island, and about 15 birds in a flock flying low along the Cairns foreshore, southward, on the same day. There were also between 80 to 100 present at Michaelmas Cay. On both Green Island and the Cay, immatures of slightly varying stages were recorded, most of which possessed dark shoulders, blackish primaries and a discontinuous black crescent on the hind-neck. One or two "runners" were thought to have been seen, but this is uncertain, and most improbable in view of the fact that they have never been known to breed on the Cay.

In *The Handbook of Australian Sea-Birds*, by D. L. & V. Serventy, and J. Warham (1971), the Black-naped Tern is given sedentary status, "Recorded near breeding stations during most months of the year so apparently sedentary". J. Hogan (1921), however, in his "Bird Notes from Willis Island", a south-west coral sea-cay, some 400 km east of Cairns, reports that the species, which breeds there, disappeared during January and February of 1923, and again in November and December of the same year. That the species was present at Michaelmas Cay in such numbers, and presumably does not breed there, would also indicate that it is not entirely sedentary.

The nearest breeding grounds I can find recorded for the Black-naped Tern is Woody Island, approximately 16 km E.N.E. of Mossman, and about 74 km north of Cairns, where S. R. White (1946) recorded 40 pairs brooding eggs, between October 31 and November 2, 1944.

Warham (*Emu*, 62: 107) records seeing a flock feeding near Little Fitzroy Island, off the mainland east of Cairns, and between 60 and 100 at sea near Kent Island, approximately off Innisfail, in late September. Even if the birds did originate from Woody Island, assuming they still breed there, the numbers we saw on our trip may well have been in excess of the numbers breeding there, and could thus have originated from other breeding grounds, such as those to the east.

According to K. A. Hindwood *et al.* (1963) in "Birds of the South-west Coral Sea", the nearest recorded breeding station of the Black-naped Tern was on Flinders Reef, some 325 km E.S.E. of Cairns.

Although 100 birds were recorded on Holmes Reef, about 80 km closer to Cairns, they were not nesting.

To the south lies Dunk Island, about 70 to 80 km S.S.E. of Innisfail, where, according to the *Handbook of Australian Sea-Birds*, it also apparently breeds, yet if the birds did migrate north from here, it is strange that in 14 years of birdwatching in the Innisfail district, Mrs. H. B. Gill had only recorded the species once, in November 1964.

However, it would seem evident, judging by the fairly small numbers usually seen, that the numbers we saw in December 1972, were rather unusual or somewhat exceptional. Mrs. H. B. Gill (*pers. comm.*) informed us that the Black-naped Tern has never before been seen on the Cairns waterfront, making our record an unusual one, and she also suggested possible confusion with eclipse Little Terns. However, there is no doubt in our minds as to what species we saw.

In view of the numbers seen, and the immatures present, there seems much to indicate that either the species may actually indulge in some post-breeding dispersal or migration, probably from the east, or the birds that we saw were vagrants, resulting from the exceptional weather conditions of the time. Considering that the cyclones and depressions were predominantly derived from the east and the north, it would seem more feasible that the birds did originate in the south-west Coral Sea. This would make the 27 km trip from Green Island to the Cairns foreshore fairly easy, if they had already been driven several hundred kilometres from their breeding grounds.

It would appear that the presence of fairly large numbers of Black-naped Terns in the Cairns region while we were there was probably due, in part at least, to the climatic conditions influencing their movement.

### Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii*

An interesting observation on the Cairns waterfront was of a single Roseate Tern, about which little was really noted, other than the fact that the bird flew amongst a flock of Black-naped Terns, but separated from these, by landing on the mud-flats just below, where it remained resting amid various waders. It was about the same size, if not a little larger, than the Black-napes. It was of very pale appearance, with noticeably long tail streamers, and possessed bright scarlet-red legs and feet, a dark, possibly all black, bill and the black crown, with a possible whitish forehead. The observation was much shorter than desired, and did not permit recognition of rosy-tinged under parts, tail streamers projecting, or long bill.

"Sighted occasionally off Cairns by L. Amiet" (*Australian Bird Watcher*, 3: 60), the Roseate Tern has, also, never before been sighted on the Cairns foreshore. Our observation bears a remarkable resemblance to a record made by J. Hogan (*loc. cit.*), where he states "the only occasion on which a Roseate Tern was observed was on the afternoon of January 19, 1924, when a single bird was on

the beach among a group of Black-naped Terns". Although some 400 km away, our bird was seen in similar circumstances on January 11, 1972.

The Roseate Tern is not mentioned in "Birds of the South-West Coral Sea", and no mention is made of Hogan's record for the Willis Group, as this paper is based on observations made during two trips, extending over October and November 1961, and September and October 1960, only.

Another point that bears mention is the association of this species with the Black-naped Tern, "a point that has been stressed many times by observers" (Cooper, 1948), with which it nearly always nests. Our bird may possibly have been derived from such a breeding ground, where the two species nest.

Sooty Tern, *Sterna fuscata*, and Common Noddy, *Anous stolidus*.

The two most common terns noted on Michaelmas Cay were the Sooty Tern and the Common Noddy, both of which presumably breed here throughout spring and early summer, and in the case of the Sooty Tern, apparently also in autumn (Serventy *et al.*, 1971). Both have been found breeding in October, as reported in the *Australian Bird Watcher*, 3: 60, when the latter were reported nesting in thousands, with eggs and young in all stages.

We found the Sooty Tern on Michaelmas Cay, in their thousands also, however, there were few eggs. Immatures, on the other hand, were very abundant, and hundreds grouped together on the western fringes of the cay, on the beach, in clusters, which they seemed to prefer more than the inner vegetated parts of the cay, where the adults rested. The adults inhabited the northern end of the island generally, and probably nested there, whilst the Noddies were nesting more on the southern end of the vegetated centre. The immatures were present in varying stages, although all had left the nest, and many, perhaps most, were able to fly. Indeed, en route to the cay, some immatures were noticed flying around the boat.

The Sooty Tern is known to be highly pelagic in habit, so much so, that Serventy and Warham (*loc. cit.*) state that they never come to the mainland "under normal conditions". Mrs. H. B. Gill, in 15 years of observing at Innisfail, has never recorded the species, even washed-up, on beaches only 100 km south of Cairns. We recorded the tern commonly at sea, in large feeding-flocks, with Noddies, en route to Green Island and to Michaelmas Cay, yet we did not see it at either Green Island or on the Cairns foreshore. However, we did see one at Cardwell, about 200 km south of Cairns, on January 9, 1972, which was flying along the beach, and above the pine trees aligning it, at Rockingham Bay. It was probably a straggler, which had been caught in the severe weather conditions and storms, that brought constant, heavy rains and flooding to Cardwell at this time.

The Common Noddy seemed to be nesting later than the Sooty Tern at Michaelmas Cay, for Sooty immatures were well in advance of those of the Noddy. In fact, the Noddy was at its peak of breeding, in the egg stage, and nests containing either one egg each, or down-





The 60 Lesser Crested Tern fledglings were herded together by a few adults.

Plate 22

Photo by R. A. Noske

covered juveniles. These young birds could be handled, and could hardly stray from the nest.

Like the Sooty Tern, the Common Noddy was seen frequently at sea, in considerable numbers en route to Green Island and Michaelmas Cay. Unlike the Sooty, however, they were seen at Green Island, with a maximum of four at one time, of which two rested for a while on the beach, on the south-eastern side, and were later joined by a pair of White-capped Noddies (see later). One Common Noddy was also seen at Cardwell, but unlike the Sooty Tern it had landed, and rested for most of the day on the beach there. The bird was noticeably confiding and allowed fairly close approach.

Both the Sooty Tern and the Common Noddy seemed to be nesting rather late in the season, though without further details of their normal breeding months I cannot say whether this is abnormal for these birds. In the case of the Sooty Tern, it would not be difficult to imagine them breeding throughout the year, or most of it, as they are known to do on Ascension Island, where the breeding cycle extends over nine and a half months of the year (Serventy *et al.* 1971, p. 226). Although the Common Noddy is considered to be a spring nester at islands near Cairns (*loc. cit.* p. 232), Hogan has recorded them breeding in October 1922; February through to April 1923, and in April and May 1924, on Willis Island, in the south-west Coral Sea. Our birds would appear to have laid in late December to early January, and assuming that they bred in October 1971, as they are supposed to, this may indicate that either the species can breed at Michaelmas Cay throughout most of the year, or their normal spring nesting was disrupted in some way by climatic hazards at the time. Undoubtedly, the storms and cyclones, in December 1971, had some influence or effect on the terns breeding at the Cay; just as they may have also driven the Black-naped Terns and White-capped Noddies there, perhaps even destroyed their earlier attempts.

With this assumption one wonders why some species were in

advance of the others in breeding, such as the Sooty Tern was to the Noddy. The species breeding on the Cay followed the sequence, from most to least advanced stages, Sooty Tern, Lesser Crested Tern, Common, and possibly White-capped Noddy, and Crested Tern.

Lesser Crested Tern, *Sterna bengalensis*.

This species, which appeared to be the second most advanced in breeding on the Cay, proved to be interesting in habits and plumage. In view of the recorded breeding season for the Cay, which is October to December, it was probably breeding almost "on schedule", as all the juveniles had left the nests already.

The Lesser Crested Tern was easily the most aggressive tern in the area. No doubt this was due, in part at least, to the presence of their young in a fairly early stage. The 60 or so fledglings were "herded" together by a few adult birds on our approach, while other adults called angrily at us from the air, threatening rather than attacking. Led by two adults the party of young birds marched south along the eastern beach in a very tight pack, until we approached from the side and forced the birds to take to the water. There they took refuge in very shallow water, floating and paddling in the same close flock, and guided by the adults. They remained off-shore until we left that side of the island, and it was considered safe to return to the beach.

All adults seen on Michaelmas Cay, and the 20 birds seen on Green Island, were in the supposed "non-breeding" garb, with white forehead and fore-crown, black hind-crown and nape, and black and white streaked mid-crown. An indistinct blackish crescent before the eye was also noticeable. In "Birds of the Capricorns" (Cooper, 1948) plate 19 shows this feature to advantage.

Although the birds we saw had just finished breeding, one would expect them to retain their breeding dress at least until their young were able to fly. This phenomena of birds breeding in the recorded "non-breeding" plumage, however, is well-known, as the photograph mentioned above makes obvious. An interesting photograph is one taken by S. R. White (White 1946) at Michaelmas Cay in late December, 1944, showing about six adult Lesser Crested Terns on eggs. Two of these birds possess a black forehead and fore-crown, although there is a thin white line over the base of the culmen, front-most feathers of forehead, and white specks on the remaining forehead and fore-crown. Also the black on the crown of the birds with the white foreheads reaches the eye on the side of the head, whereas in the first photograph it does not even go this far. One can only assume the amount of black and white on the crown varies considerably, and is perhaps more a matter of age than anything.

Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii*.

The Crested Tern reputedly nests at Michaelmas Cay in October to December, the same months as for the Lesser Crested Tern (Gill, 1970). However, when we were there in mid-January, the species was just into the egg stage, with hundreds of eggs. These eggs were confined to two or three colonies, which were all situated within the

top or northern half of the raised part of the Cay, the largest colony being on the eastern side, bordering on the beach, and all were approximately square in shape. The Crested Terns had possession of the barest parts of the raised Cay, the vegetated parts surrounding them being occupied by Common Noddies and Sooty Terns. The birds guarded their eggs until we approached them, when they abandoned them unhesitatingly.

The only birds resembling non-breeding Crested Terns were a few probable immatures amongst a group of ten adults on Green Island.

An interesting record of the Crested Tern breeding in "non-breeding" plumage, was that observed by Richard Johnstone the previous year. On January 8, 1971, he joined a party on a boat trip, operating regularly from Bowen, taking supplies to Saddleback Island, north-west of the Whitsunday Passage. He was taken to a very mountainous small island called Eshelby Island, located about 20 miles north-west of Hayman Island, where there was reputed to be a tern colony. Here he discovered Bridled Terns, *Sterna anaetheta*, in thousands, and they were nesting in loose groups from near the water right up to and underneath the lighthouse. This was a very large breeding colony, which does not appear to have been recorded.

The second tern found nesting on Eshelby was the Crested Tern, which, in contrast to the Bridled, nested in tight groups. There were about 1,000 *bergii* with eggs and chicks at many stages. The birds in each group were approximately at the same stage of breeding; those in any one particular group being about the same age, and those groups with eggs, having no chicks.

The surprising thing about these Crested Terns was that every adult was breeding in the accepted "non-breeding" plumage for the species. Not one adult bird was seen with the black crown and clear cut white forehead. It is strange that at Eshelby Island, there were no exceptions to what was normal in that colony, "non-breeding" plumage, while approximately 500 km away, at the same time of the year at Michaelmas Cay, in 1972, every bird, without exception, displayed normal breeding dress.

White-capped Noddy, *Anous minutus*.

The most surprising inclusion to the list of the region was this species, for which I can find no previous record. We certainly did not expect to encounter this bird so far away from its normal breeding range.

At Green Island, on January 11, 1972, we found two White-capped Noddies resting on a little sand-spit, alongside two, later one, Common Noddies, thereby affording good comparisons of the two species. The White-capped Noddy could be easily distinguished from the latter by its smaller size, much darker and blacker overall appearance, whiter, more extensive cap, and the longer and much slenderer bill. The two birds sat close together, and were very confident, much more so than the Common, which was wary, and we

were able to approach within touching distance. There were several instances when a bird would touch us on taking off, after which they returned to almost the same position on the beach. The pair later took to the trees behind the beach, which resembled their homeland *Pisonias*, and here they rested without further disturbance. The Common Noddies took to the sea on our slightest approach.

Three days later, on Michaelmas Cay, the White-capped Noddy was again observed, three or four being present, and photographs were taken of one bird. On the south-western extremity of the raised, vegetated part of the Cay, where it was probably the highest, four Noddy nests were found in very close proximity to one another, and about 50 cm off the ground. The nests were constructed on low shrubs, and were untidy, though substantial structures, consisting of an accumulation of twigs, loose shells, leaves and feathers, and containing one egg. About 30 cm space existed between each egg.

On our arrival, the sitting birds stood up and protested. The two species were recognized at once, there being about six Commons and two White-capped. The White-capped Noddies were noted at the nest, which was situated on the north-west corner of the little group. Although one of the birds protected or shadowed the egg for a while, it was never actually seen to rest on it; neither were any of the Commons, which occupied the other three nests, seen resting on their eggs. Unfortunately, the egg was not examined, nor did we attempt to differentiate between the species' eggs, which are very alike. We were almost certain at the time that egg and nest belonged to the White-capped Noddy pair, and did not really contemplate otherwise. However, the possibility that the birds had taken over or were "looking after" a Common Noddy's egg cannot be excluded, and while this is fairly unlikely, list this as a probable record of the White-capped Noddy breeding on Michaelmas Cay.

The White-capped Noddy is generally regarded as a tree-nesting bird. Serventy *et al.* (1971) states rather emphatically that the species nests "always in trees". However, on Ascension Island, in the absence of trees, the species nests on the ground, as it does also on some of the Hawaiian Islands (Hindwood *et al.*). Peter Fullager (*pers. comm.*) had seen White-capped and Common Noddies nesting side by side near or on the ground.

As the species also nests on *Messerschmidia* trees, only 1 m but growing up to 2 m high, on Chilcott Island, approximately 500 km due east of Cairns, it does seem entirely possible for our birds to have nested on a platform of raised herbage, almost 60 cm tall.

Hindwood quotes an instance of a Common Noddy brooding its egg on the nest platform of a White-capped Noddy. He also records that some tree nests of the Common Noddy were found at least 7 m from the ground, though "there is a preference for low shrubs up to about 120 cm high, but nests are also placed on the ground". So neither the White-capped nor the Common are strictly tree or ground nesters.

I cannot find any other records of the White-capped Noddy in the



Cairns region. Yet in the south-west Coral Sea, breeding occurs extensively on the grass and tree covered cays, the closest to Cairns being that of North-East Cay, in the Herald Group, some 400 km to the east. This island supports dense patches of *Pisonia* trees, the species' favourite nesting sites. However, on September 27, 1960, and only about 250 km east, north-east of Cairns, the species was sighted on Holmes Reef, though breeding was not observed (Hindwood *loc. cit.*).

Again, it would seem likely that the White-capped Noddies we saw at both Green Island and Michaelmas Cay, were "blown in" by the cyclonic weather conditions of the time. Apart from the south-west Coral Sea, the species is known to breed in the Torres Strait, to the north of our region, and in the Capricorns, to the south. Considering that both of these areas are equally about 1,000 km either side of Cairns, it would seem more plausible to assume that our birds colonized the area from the east.

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## A Victorian Record of the Asiatic Dowitcher

By FRED. T. H. SMITH, Kew, Victoria.

#### SUMMARY

The second Australian and first Victorian record of the Asiatic Dowitcher, *Limnodromus semipalmatus*, is reported, with field-notes on its habits and a detailed description of plumage and soft parts. Photographs enlarged from 35 mm colour transparencies are provided. Comparison between the Asiatic Dowitcher and the two North American species is made. Some supporting notes are also given from the literature, with brief comments on taxonomy, breeding and non-breeding range, and origin of the appellation dowitcher.

#### GENERAL

The first record of the Asiatic Dowitcher in Australia was of one shot at Frances Bay, Darwin Harbour, Northern Territory, on October 16, 1971. The collector, D. N. Crawford, wrote to me seeking more information on the species than was available to him at that time, and I was able to supply him with some notes on descrip-