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RARE AND UNUSUAL BIRDS OBSERVED ON TERN ISLAND, FRENCH FRIGATE SHOALS, NORTHWESTERN HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

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The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are a series of 10 small islands and atolls that extend northwest for 2000 km from the main Hawaiian Islands (Pyle and Pyle 2009). The islands are part of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, and provide a sanctuary for millions of nesting seabirds and thousands of wintering shorebirds (Pyle and Pyle 2009). Tern Island is located at the northwestern tip of the French Frigate Shoals and is the largest (~12 hectares) and only human-made island in the shoals. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands' location in the Pacific Ocean offers exceptional opportunity for assessment of patterns of avian migration and vagrancy. The islands lie within the trans-Pacific migration route of several shorebirds from Alaska that migrate long distances (Gill et al. 2005) and is within the influence of several seasonal macro-meteorological processes (e.g., Aleutian Low, Hawaiian High, and associated synoptic disturbances) that affect bird movement and migration along the North Pacific coasts (e.g., Christoforou and Hameed 1997).

From June through December 2010, Howard and Harvey were stationed on Tern Island, monitoring seabirds as part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Nesting Seabird Monitoring Study. While on the island, we noted several rare and unusual species, including the first Fork-tailed Swift (*Apus pacificus*) recorded in the French Frigate Shoals and first Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*) recorded in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

We first observed a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) roosting on the island on 14 June and saw it sporadically until 16 July (Figure 1). Short-eared Owls, including some collected and confirmed by size as the migratory subspecies *A. f. flammeus* (Pyle and Pyle 2009), have been reported regularly from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Having obtained only photo documentation of the bird, we cannot exclude its having been *A. f. sandwichensis*, a slightly smaller and darker subspecies resident in the main Hawaiian Islands but thought by Pyle and Pyle (2009) to be absent from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Our observation is unusual in that it is only the second in summer of nine previous records of this species from French Frigate Shoals, though there are scattered June records of this owl from Midway (Pyle and Pyle 2009).

We observed two Least Terns (*Sternula antillarum*) sporadically from 31 July through 12 August, when we found one dead. Unfortunately, we lacked facilities to preserve this specimen and the carcass had to be discarded. The remaining bird was last seen on 31 August. No breeding or nesting was observed. The Least Tern is an occasional nonbreeding visitor and rare breeding visitor to both the Northwestern and main Hawaiian Islands (Pyle and Pyle 2009). The similar Little Tern (*S. albigrons*) has also been documented on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, where it is also an occasional nonbreeding visitor and rare breeder (Pyle and Pyle 2009). The birds we observed showed no contrast between the gray back and uppertail coverts, as expected for the Least Tern (Figure 2), whereas the Little Tern shows a distinct contrast between the gray back and white uppertail coverts (Melgar 2001). Although currently undocumented on the Hawaiian Islands, Saunders's Tern (*Sternula saundersi*) differs from the similar Least Tern by its square white forehead patch and olive or reddish-

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Figure 1. Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, 14 June 2010, presumably the same individual seen sporadically until 16 July 2010.

Photo by Sarah Harvey

brown legs with any yellow being restricted to the feet (Melgar 2001). The birds we observed had completely yellow legs and the white forehead patch extended back into the black forehead, as in the Least Tern (Figure 2).

Howard and Harvey observed a single adult White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*) flying over the island on 12 August. The bird did not stop to forage or roost, and we took no photos. The combination of black outer primaries contrasting with white primary coverts, a relatively small bill, and fast snappy wingbeats distinguished this from other species of tropicbird (Harrison 1983).

The White-tailed Tropicbird breeds in the main Hawaiian Islands but has only recently established itself as a breeding species in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, as a result of human settlement on Midway. Nonbreeding individuals disperse widely through the Pacific (Pyle and Pyle 2009). Amerson (1971) hypothesized that this species could nest on La Perouse Pinnacle in the French Frigate Shoals, but we saw none there during three one-day trips to the pinnacle that coincided with the species' breeding season.

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Figure 2. Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, 31 July 2010. Differs from the similar Little Tern (*S. albifrons*) by lack of contrast between the gray back and uppertail coverts and from Saunders's Tern (*S. saundersi*) by the completely yellow legs and white forehead patch extending back into the black forehead.

Photo by Sarah Harvey

We saw a swift on 30 October as it flew over the island at sunset. Later that evening we found what was likely the same individual perched on the outside mesh covering of a window and from photographs we were able to identify it as a Fork-tailed or Pacific Swift (*Apus pacificus*; Figure 3). The bird remained perched there overnight and was last seen on the morning of 31 October. This species is considered a very rare vagrant in the Hawaiian Islands, with no known observation on the main southeastern islands and only two records in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, both at Midway, in 1995 and 1999 (Pyle and Pyle 2009).

The Fork-tailed Swift breeds from central Siberia east to Kamchatka, southern China, and the Malay Peninsula and winters south to Australia (Higgins 1999, Brazil 2009, DSEWPac 2013). Though its main migration route is along the coast of Asia, there are casual records of this species as far north as the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska, in the Yukon, Canada, and south to the Marshall and Mariana islands (Gibson and Byrd 2007, Pyle and Pyle 2009). Almost all of these records, like ours, are from autumn after most birds have arrived on their nonbreeding grounds in Australia (Higgins 1999, Brazil 2009, DSEWPac 2013).

We first noted a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) on 4 October, observing it foraging until finding it dead on 6 November (Figure 4). Unfortunately, we lacked facilities to preserve this specimen and the carcass had to be discarded. The Great Blue Heron is considered a vagrant throughout the Hawaiian Islands, with very few observations on the main Hawaiian Islands and only one confirmed record (September 1988) in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, this also on Tern Island (Pyle and Pyle

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Figure 3. Fork-tailed Swift (*Apus pacificus*) on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, 30 October 2010.

Photo by Phillip Howard

2009). The similar Gray Heron (*A. cinerea*) has been recorded in the westernmost Aleutian Islands and the Pribilof Islands in Alaska, and in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands subsequent to our observation (Maynard 2010). The Gray Heron, however, lacks the rufous thighs and leading edge of the wings characteristic of the Great Blue Heron (Figure 4).

Howard and Harvey observed a single Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*) for about a minute on 15 November as it foraged among bushes. It flew off, not to be seen again, and no photos were taken during the observation period. The Japanese White-eye was first introduced to O'ahu in 1929 and has rapidly expanded its population and range since. It is now considered the most abundant landbird in the main Hawaiian Islands, but as of 2010 had not spread into the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (Pyle and Pyle 2009). Our observation apparently establishes the first record for this species in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Although in its native range northern populations of the Japanese White-eye are migratory, the specimen records indicate, and most literature assumes, that only the nonmigratory, nominate subspecies, *Z. j. japonicus*, occurs on the Hawaiian Islands (Pyle and Pyle 2009). However, records from far at sea (185–490 km south-southwest of Kaua'i) and on Johnston Atoll (1200 km from Kaua'i) indicate a tendency for individuals of the Hawaiian populations to disperse (Pyle and Pyle 2009).

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Figure 4. A carcass of a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), presumably the same individual found alive and photographed on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, 4 October 2010. The rufous thighs and leading edge of the wings (right panel) distinguish this from the similar Gray Heron (*A. cinerea*), which has also been recorded from the archipelago (see text).

Photo by Phillip Howard, 6 November 2010

conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We especially thank Paul Lehman and Robert Gill for guidance and review of the manuscript.

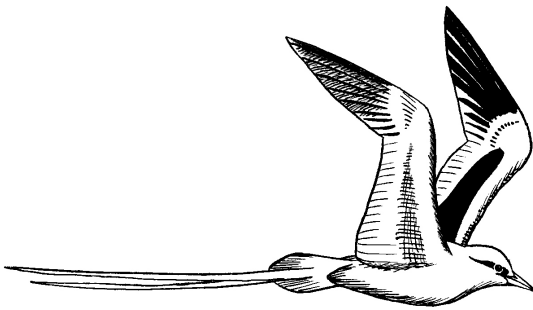
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White-tailed Tropicbird

Sketch by George C. West