

DOES THE RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD NEST ON THE NEPTUNE ISLANDS?

Aspects of Jordon's (1995) note on observations of Red-tailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon rubricauda* on the Neptune Islands suggested to me that it would be worth looking more closely for nesting tropicbirds on these islands.

Firstly the description of the islands makes them sound suitable for the nesting of Red-tailed Tropicbirds. The Neptune Islands are granitic and of a similar height to Sugarloaf Rock off the SW Western Australian coast where this species has bred (Tarburton 1977). Many tropicbird nests are found on the rugged parts of Sugarloaf Rock, Lord Howe (Fullagar *et al.* 1974), Norfolk, Phillip (Tarburton 1980) and the Kermadec Islands (Merton 1970). My use of the term "too precipitous" for nests on parts of Sugarloaf (Tarburton 1977) may have been misleading, for if there are crevices or ledges on cliffs on a nesting island all three species of tropicbirds will use them. This may have led to Jordon's (1995) assertion that the south-west cliffs of South Neptune Island (35°21'S, 136°06'E) are too rugged for tropicbird nesting.

Another feature of the Neptune Islands that would favour Red-tailed Tropicbird nesting is the lack of cats, rats or other predatory mammals on these islands (Jordon 1995). All attempts at nesting on the mainland near Sugarloaf have been aborted, and many of the birds have been killed by predators, including man. On Norfolk Island cats have reduced the Red-tailed Tropicbird population considerably (*pers. obs.*).

Jordon's (1995) observation of two adults and an immature does not confirm that the birds have nested nearby. In a study of similar Red-tailed Tropicbird behaviour, where adult birds accompany their fledglings and call to one another, Ainley *et al.* (1986) recorded ten instances of such behaviour between 172 and 821 km from the nearest island. These authors suggest that one or both parent birds spend considerable time in post-fledging "training" of their young in the complex art of locating and catching sparse prey. However, the fact that the birds were persistently near land is suggestive that they were intent on breeding and this is supported by the timing of the sightings, which were over the summer period.

Jordon (1995) suggested that the Red-tailed Tropicbirds were scavenging around the Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* colony, but this would not be the case as tropicbirds only feed by diving for

their own fish and squid far out to sea. They do not even pick up regurgitated fish from their own nests. It would be more likely that the Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae*, mentioned by Jordon (1995), would scavenge eggs from the tropicbirds. It is probable that the tropicbirds were attracted by the behaviour of the terns, as breeding time is the only time that tropicbirds group together or appear to respond to other birds or to land. During the rest of the year tropicbirds lead a solitary existence and remain well clear of land (Ainley *et al.* 1986; Dunlop *et al.* 1988).

One explanation of the possible extension of the Red-tailed Tropicbirds into southern Australian waters is as a response to changing salinity of the ocean (Dunlop *et al.* 1988). This tropicbird typically forages in more saline water than the White-tailed Tropicbird *P. lepturus*. Warm temperature is only one factor in their ecology and therefore the name tropicbird is slightly misleading. The best technique to search for nest sites is to look for circling birds between 1100 and 1500 hours, as previous research at other locations has shown that most breeding activity occurs at these times (*pers. obs.*). Further effort may be rewarded with the discovery of the first Red-tailed Tropicbird breeding colony in South Australia.

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