

MAINE SAW IT FIRST! MORE ON THE RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD

Allied Whale, College of the Atlantic  
Bar Harbor, Maine December 5, 1986

Dear Mr. Forster,

Kyle Jones has suggested that I write to you concerning our sighting of a Red-billed Tropicbird at Mt. Desert Rock (MDR), a three-and-a-half-acre island located approximately 22 miles south of Mt. Desert Island, Maine. MDR has been the site of a field research station since 1973 and is manned every summer by personnel from the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine. We keep watch from the 21-meter lighthouse tower on MDR during daylight hours to count marine mammal and pelagic bird species utilizing the area.

On August 31, 1986, David James was on first watch. David is a first-class birder from Australia who has spent a lot of time on the shelf edge of eastern Australia looking for pelagic birds and is familiar with many species of prion, petrel, storm-petrel, and albatross.

At 6:15 A.M., David spotted the bird and using 10x40 binoculars, was able to identify it as an adult Red-billed Tropicbird. He noted pale barring on the back, black primaries, blood-red bill, and two-foot tail streamers. The bird flew around the perimeter of the island several times, and David was able to verify his identification.

By the time the rest of the crew was up, the bird had gone. However, at approximately 11:00 A.M. the tropicbird returned to the area. Again it flew several times around the island and almost landed among a group of seven Black-legged Kittiwakes. At this time I photographed the bird from the lighthouse tower, using a 300 mm zoom lens and taking six frames at about 400 meters distance. I also noted the field characteristics of the bird, which do not come out well on film because of extreme distance. Through binoculars, the barring on the back was distinct, as were the bill and primaries. The tropicbird remained in the area for another ten minutes or so and finally left, heading in a south-southwesterly direction. It was not seen again at MDR.

Once back on the mainland, I copied several of the slides onto black-and-white film but have not yet sent the original to be duplicated. I am sending along the negative in lieu of a slide as I'm sure you appreciate documentation whenever possible. Although just as distant, the quality of the slide is better than this negative.

I know we're all wondering whether or not this is the same bird as the one on Martha's Vineyard; if so, I can't help being pleased that we spotted and identified it first.

Harriet Corbett  
Project Director  
Mt. Desert Rock Marine Research Station