

## THIRD CONFIRMED RECORD OF THE RED-FOOTED BOOBY *SULA SULA* FROM SRI LANKA

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Received 13 August 2011, accepted 21 September 2012

On 27 April 2011, the authors were informed of a large gull-like bird found by a local fisherman around 06h00 in Eththukala (7°14'N, 79°47'E), Negombo, in the Gampaha District of Western Province, Sri Lanka. The bird had been found in the sea about 3 km from the shore. It was alive but exhausted and unable to fly when caught.

We retrieved the bird and kept it in captivity for several days. From Ali and Ripley (1978), the bird was identified as an immature Red-footed Booby. The Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*) is a pantropical resident (Howard & Moore 1980, Le Corre 1999). Adults are polymorphic, with three recognized major adult plumage types (white, white-tailed brown and brown) and several intermediates, including golden white, black-tailed white, and white-headed white-tailed brown (Nelson 1978, Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

The bird had generally grayish-brown plumage, with paler underwing coverts and the a lighter throat, with the breast and belly clearly darker (Figure 1). The bare skin around the eye and the bill was ocean-blue. The iris was bright yellow. The head was dusky white, fading into the body color on the nape. The bill was dark brown except for the pinkish base of the lower mandible. Some parts of the bill were much paler, but the tip was black. Legs and



**Fig. 1.** Immature white color morph of Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* at Eththukala, Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Photograph by C. J. Amarasinghe)

feet were flesh-colored; the feet were webbed, with claws dusky white in color. The tail was pointed with 14 tail feathers. The head-to-tail length was 685 mm; the wingspan 1.45 m; weight 0.900 kg; culmen 80.0 mm; gape 101.6 mm; tarsus 38.1 mm; the middle toe (without claw) was 76.2 mm. The bird fed voraciously in captivity, swallowing fish whole. On occasion, it attacked aggressively, raising the feathers on its head.

The dark bill, yellow eye, and pale-colored legs and feet all identify this bird as an immature. The commonest morph of Red-footed Booby in the Indian Ocean, including all extant breeding colonies (Le Corre 1999), is all white except for black primaries and secondaries. The specimen recorded by de Silva (1985) was also a white morph. The other morphs are largely brown (Diamond 1971). Juveniles cannot usually be assigned to a particular morph, but the much whiter head of this bird suggests it might have been beginning transition to the adult plumage of a white morph.

The Red-footed Booby is a vagrant to Sri Lanka, previously known from only two confirmed records (Kotagama & Rathnaweera 2010). The first specimen was captured somewhere in Ceylon and brought to the Colombo Museum on 2 July 1936 (Henry 1955). The second record is from Dehiwala (6°50'N, 79°52'E), in the Colombo District of Western Province (de Silva 1985). However, de Silva (2011) also reported the species as a visitor, in very small numbers, to the western and southern coasts of Sri Lanka. He also reported that the *Seabird Watch (Sri Lanka)* has a few records of this species during the southwest monsoon (May/September), and moreover he has observed two specimens off the western coast during December/January (northeast monsoon).

Weather conditions in the area for the 24 hours before the bird was found could explain its origin. The sky was mostly overcast, and afternoon thundershowers with light winds were reported during the period. Strong southwest winds gusting to 78 km/h were recorded from 14h45 that day, lasting for about one hour in the particular area, and may have blown the bird near the shore. At around the same time that the Red-footed Booby was found, many Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) were storm-blown to the area, including three banded in the Seychelles or Juan de Nova, to the southwest of Sri Lanka (M. LeCorre and C.Feare, in litt. to editor); this booby may have been affected by the same extreme weather event. The largest colonies of Red-footed Boobies in the region lie to the southwest of Sri Lanka: Chagos archipelago (5°59'N, 71°59'E), Aldabra Atoll (9°24'S, 46°21'E) and Ile Europa (22°21'S, 40° 21'E); although the closest of these (Chagos) is over 1600 km away.

The bird was kept in captivity for eight days. During this time it ate well. After this period, it began to flap its wings and attempted to escape. On release we marked the bird with a plastic label (numbered 48) on the right leg and released it from the coast of Eththukala. This is the first detailed observation of Red-footed Booby from Sri Lanka in the last 25 years.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors wish to thank Lal Edison Fernando and Mahinda Marasinghe for collecting the specimen, their information, and assistance with keeping the bird in captivity. We thank Rex de Silva for providing his publication and previous photographs and Dr. Sriyanie Miththapala for assistance during preparing of the manuscript. Special thanks to D. A. Jayasinghe Arachchi, Department of Meteorology, Colombo, Sri Lanka for providing climatic data and to Sreekar Rachakonda and Aasheesh Pittie for providing literature from India. We gratefully acknowledge the comments by the anonymous reviewers and especially Tony Diamond for his vital help and contribution in reviewing the manuscript.

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