

The Sooty Tern — New South Wales Records

By A. R. SEFTON, Thirroul, N.S.W.

On February 24, 1957, while investigating the sea-bird mortality on beaches near Wollongong, my son, Gary, collected the remains of a Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*), a species rarely recorded from New South Wales. The bird, which was found on Fairy Meadow beach, some 48 miles south of Sydney, has been preserved as a study skin (no. 1.194, Gibson/Sefton collection).

A description of the specimen, which is a bird in immature plumage, is as follows: Bill dark brownish-grey with a black tip. Entire head and upper-parts, including the wings and tail, sooty black, with whitish tips to the feathers of the mantle and wing coverts; breast dark brownish-grey, becoming paler on the abdomen; underside of flight feathers medium-grey, remainder of underwing lighter; underside of tail medium-grey becoming lighter towards the base; shafts of flight and tail feathers black on top, white beneath; legs and feet black, having a reddish tinge when fresh. Measurements: culmen 34.4 mm., wing 232 mm., tail 123 mm., tarsus 23.4 mm., middle toe and claw 28.3 mm. The gonads were so minute as to make the sex indeterminable. The bird was very thin and emaciated and its stomach was empty.

G. M. Mathews and Tom Iredale (1921), quote the following measurements for an adult male Sooty Tern in breeding plumage: culmen 42 mm., wing 304 mm., tail 210 mm., tarsus 24 mm. Comparison with these and others quoted by W. B. Alexander (1954), and W. R. B. Oliver (1955), indicates that the immature Fairy Meadow beach bird had only recently left its nesting ground.

The closest breeding place of the Sooty Tern to New South Wales is Lord Howe Island. A cyclone which passed close to that island about February 17, 1957, and which then veered towards the central New South Wales coastline, was doubtless the cause of the 'wreck' of the immature Sooty Tern found on Fairy Meadow beach on February 24. The remains of a Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*), another species that breeds on Lord Howe Island and also a rare derelict along the eastern Australian sea-board, was found nearby at the same time. Lord Howe Island, the presumed origin of both birds, is 450 miles north-east of Fairy Meadow beach.

A. J. North mentions (1914) several examples of the Sooty Tern in the Australian Museum, Sydney, labelled 'Sydney Harbour'; then stated that he had never observed the species anywhere on the coast of New South Wales, and that no specimen had been received at the Museum from any part of that State during the previous twenty-seven years.

To elucidate these somewhat conflicting remarks, a request was sent to Dr. J. A. Keast of the Australian Museum, Sydney, for details of specimens from New South Wales at present in the Museum, and he kindly supplied (*in litt.* 17/4/57 and 29/7/57) the following information.

- 0.23783. Adult. Old collection. 'New South Wales'.
- 0.33589. Juvenile female. Collected Queenscliff, near Manly, February 3, 1934, Masters Knowles and Welsh.
- 0.38729. Adult. Collected Dorriggo Tableland, June 25, 1950, M. T. Goddard. One of two examples found at the same time.
- 0.39322. Immature. Collected Shoal Bay, Port Stephens, January 5, 1954, A. D'Ombra.

Although Goddard and Hindwood (1951) have given details of a specimen from Long Reef near Sydney, collected in May, 1892, figured by Mathews, *The Birds of Australia*, vol. 2, 1912, pl. 113, and now in the American Museum of Natural History (*ex Mathews' collection*), it is hardly likely that the missing specimens referred to by North have found their way into overseas museums. Possibly they have been lost or destroyed.

Sight records for New South Wales localities are few. Two occurrences in Sydney Harbour, one on February 2, 1934, the other on December 11, 1942, were reported by Tom Iredale and recorded later (1951). The only other sight record known to me is for a bird seen by G. Marshall off Bradley's Head, Sydney Harbour, on January 19, 1951. It was in the company of a Noddy (*Anous stolidus*), a species rarely noted in New South Wales waters. Rough seas and stormy conditions generally prevailed for several days prior to the observation of this bird (K. A. Hindwood *in litt.* 28/3/57).

From the foregoing remarks it would seem that the Sooty Tern does not normally range into the coastal waters of New South Wales, and that it is but a straggler forced into those parts by adverse weather conditions.

REFERENCES

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