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The Sooty Gull, *Larus hemprichii* (Aves: Laridae), on Nosy Ve: First records for Madagascar

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Résumé

Le 20 décembre 2007, un Goéland de Hemprich, *Larus hemprichii*, a été observé sur Nosy Ve (23°39'11"S, 43°36'05"E) au sud-ouest de Madagascar. Après consultation auprès d'observateurs visitant régulièrement la région, il s'avère qu'un *L. hemprichii* avait déjà été vu sur cette île en octobre 2005 et que l'oiseau de 2007 était présent depuis le 18 octobre de cette année. Il est possible que ces observations correspondent à un unique individu revenant sur Nosy Ve, dont les colonies kenyanes qui constituent le site de reproduction de l'espèce le plus proche de Madagascar. L'observation de cet individu constitue la première de mention publiée de l'espèce pour Madagascar.

Introduction

On 20 December 2007, I visited Nosy Ve (23°39'11"S, 43°36'05"E), a small island off the coast of Anakao, extreme southwestern Madagascar, essentially to visit the colony of Red-tailed Tropicbirds (*Phaethon rubricauda*) inhabiting the southern portion of the islet. Other bird observations included large flocks of Lesser Crested Terns (*Sterna bengalensis*) and Greater Crested Terns (*S. bergii*) accompanied by some Crab Plovers (*Dromas ardeola*), Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*), and Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*). Standing slightly apart from the terns was a bicolored gull, which showed distinct sooty upperparts contrasted by a pure white inferior third of the body.

A thin white collar separated the dark gray back from the dark gray-brown head. The flat forehead did not show any marked angle relative to the beak. The only contrasting pattern of the head was a white crescent above the eye. These are characters diagnostic of the Sooty Gull (*Larus hemprichii*). Further, based on images taken of the bird (Figure 1), additional distinctive characters of *L. hemprichii* were noted: the dark back plumage terminating in a triangular shape over a uniformly white and squared tail; the upperwings appeared uniformly dark gray except for a pronounced thin white trailing edge on the secondaries and inner primaries; the second to six primaries showed a distinctive white rachis, which become less distinctive towards the more inner primaries; the wing tips did not appear particularly pointed; the underwing coverts were dull brown, with coverts and axillaries being darker than the remiges; and the yellow beak was long, massive, and red tipped. The legs appeared quite dark but I was not able to note precisely the coloration. On 21 December 2007, an adult breeding *L. hemprichii* (probably the same individual) was observed flying along the coast, some 7 km north of Anakao (23°39'20"S, 43°37'56"E), with a flock of *Sterna bergii*.

Identification of the Nosy Ve gull

The number of large and dark bodied gulls in the world is rather limited (Del Hoyo *et al.*, 1996). Only one species, *Larus hemprichii* in adult plumage, shows the sharp delimitation between the white belly and the dark gray-brown flanks and breast-band visible in the Nosy Ve bird. The narrow white collar is also characteristic of this species. *Larus hemprichii* can be confused with adult White-eye Gull (*L. leucopthalmus*), which occurs in part in sympatry



Figure 1. Two different views of a Sooty Gull, *Larus hemprichii*, on Nosy Ve, Madagascar, 20 December 2007. In the lower view, it is shown flying with several Lesser Crested Terns, *Sterna bengalensis* (photograph taken by Julien Renoult).

in breeding and wintering areas, however, this latter species is rare along the eastern coast of Africa south of the Gulf of Aden and has not been recorded on Madagascar (Langrand & Sinclair, 1994). These two species can be easily differentiated from one another by a number of plumage and bill shape characters (Urban *et al.*, 1986; Olsen & Larsson, 2003). The combination of those differences allows the definitive conclusion that the bird observed on Nosy Ve and along the coast of Anakao was *L. hemprichii* in adult breeding plumage.

Status of *Larus hemprichii* in Madagascar

I contacted some bird observers working mostly for tour operators who had visited Nosy Ve during the period from late 2005 to late 2007. *Larus hemprichii* was already known to occur on Nosy Ve by a handful of birders and here is a summary of records that I was able to obtain. David Shackelford first observed an adult breeding plumage *L. hemprichii* from Nosy Ve on 10 November 2005. No observations of this species in the area of Anakao are known from 2006. On 18 October 2007, James Currie observed a *L. hemprichii*, also in adult breeding plumage, on Nosy Ve. Several

different members of birding tours subsequently observed this bird until my own observation in late December 2007. It is suspected that the same individual may have been noted on Nosy Ve between 2005 and 2007. These observations are the first records of *L. hemprichii* for Madagascar. This species should be considered a vagrant to the island.

Discussion about the origin of the Nosy Ve individual

Larus hemprichii is resident or partial intra-African migrant. Main breeding areas are located in the northern portion of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, but also nesting colonies are known from the northern Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and locally in coastal areas of Pakistan (Del Hoyo *et al.*, 1996). The two southernmost breeding sites are located in southern Somalia and in Kenya, and together account for about 50-100 pairs (Urban *et al.*, 1986). Breeding starts in June in the Egyptian Red Sea (Goodman & Storer, 1987), and extends until November in portions of the Middle East (Jennings, 1995) and October for the Kenyan colonies (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1996). After the breeding season, some birds disperse between breeding sites but most migrate southward in

October (Olsen & Larsson, 2003), up to the Tanzania-Mozambique border. On the basis of information presented above, the individual observed on Nosy Ve may have originated from the Kenyan breeding grounds after overshooting its classical southern wintering area. Other vagrant records of this species in the south-west Indian Ocean region include an individual in full breeding plumage on 29 August 2005 in the Seychelles (Hobro & Catry, 2006). The records presented here of *L. hemprichii* on Nosy Ve represents the southernmost published for this species.

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