

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* new to Yemen

SIMON ASPINALL & DAVID STANTON

Led by DS and his colleagues, Sanaa International School made its 13th annual autumn visit to the Bab Al Mandab, entrance to the Red sea, in late October 2008. Primarily an educational visit, part of the time has been given over annually to observe and count migrating raptors as they approached the crossing of the Red sea to Africa. SA gratefully accepted an offer to join the party and make daily counts.

A cyclone had hit the Aden coast late the previous week and the after-effects, violent electric storms and torrential rains, continued over the Bab al Mandab area during our stay. SA & DS had discussed the possibility of seabirds having been driven into the Red sea as a result and where might be a suitable headland to watch any movements. However, with so many raptors already passing and in need of counting the idea was dropped.

On 29 October 2008, the second day of observations in the Bab al Mandab area, DS joined SA at a vantage point on a low hill c400 m inland of the coast. By c09.30 h both Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* were already passing overhead in numbers, initially being seen at a distance to our north spiraling upwards in dense kettles, these birds then making forward progress and passing the observers in a slow glide southwards.

At 10.40 h, SA noticed a frigatebird *Fregata* sp approaching in a flock of Steppe Eagles and alerted DS who quickly got onto the bird. Frustratingly there was no camera to hand. The bird remained in view for about 20 seconds, as it passed overhead. Notes were immediately made and a sketch drawn, which later confirmed the bird's identity as a Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*—a new species for Yemen.

Description: large with narrow pointed angled wings and pterodactyl-like outline, wingspan slightly less than that of adjacent Steppe Eagles (direct size comparison was possible as the bird was flying at the same level as the eagles), total length (bill to tail) was about the same as the nearest eagles. The tail was very deeply forked, the outer tail long thin and pointed. The chin was dark, but the chest was white (hence presumably a female or immature male) with the white extending in a point onto the armpits/underwing—a crucial feature in its specific identification (Porter *et al* 1996). The rest of the underparts were all dark. The bird did not flap.

Lesser Frigatebird has been recorded in the Middle East previously, with five confirmed records from Oman, on 9 August 1986, 5–8 July 1993, 30 October 1997, 22 September and 11 October 2002 (Eriksen *et al* 2003) and one from Kuwait, on 10 April 2008 (Lansdell *et al* 2008); several other frigatebird records from the region frustratingly remain specifically unidentified. The nearest breeding colonies of Lesser Frigatebird, the frigatebird species breeding closest to Arabia, are on the Indian ocean islands of Cocos (Keeling) and the Maldives, the latter much the closer at a minimum distance of c3200 km.

The cyclone of the previous week was presumably responsible for this frigatebird having found its way up the Red sea in the first instance. Its chance observation, moreover, in a flock of migrating Steppe Eagles heading south, made it a memorable observation for the two disbelieving observers.

REFERENCES

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SJ Aspinall, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. hudhud10@gmail.com

DB Stanton, Yemen Leopard Recovery Program, PO Box 7069, Sanaa, Republic of Yemen. yos@y.net.ye