

First record of a drongo *Dicrurus* in Arabia

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Whilst working in Aden, Yemen (then a British colony) March 1946–February 1948 I regularly recorded the birds I saw in the colony. My observations were published in *Ibis* (Browne 1950). That report did not include a bird observed and described in my notes, which I now realise was a drongo *Dicrurus* sp. The details recorded in my Aden field notebook for 28 October 1946 follow. I spotted the bird, c7.5–8 inches long, in the trees of the crescent, ‘Steamer Point’ area. Plumage was all glossy black except for slightly lighter beneath the tail with possible small white marks near the tip. The bill also was black or very dark, legs lightish brown. The tail was shaped something as indicated in Plate 1 and was frequently spread upon alighting. The bird made several extensive sallies into the air from a branch or telegraph wire after insects as does a shrike or flycatcher and often flicked wings *etc.* The bill was shaped as shown in Plate 1, possibly not so conical. The eye was noticeably red. Call, a short squeaking ‘tzeek’.

The crescent was in an urban locality, Tawahi, and the trees were beside or close to the road. The coordinates were not recorded at the time but were c12.7893° N, 44.9821° E (from Google maps).

The above observation was made using 8x30 binoculars. I could not identify the bird for certain. I had never previously seen a drongo and had no book then that included an illustration or description of one. However, I was accompanied that day by Reverend JAH Dagger, an RAF Chaplain, who was visiting Aden and I believe that he may have suggested the name. Anyway, in 1956, Sergeant AS Norris of the RAF wrote me from Germany regarding bird observations he had made in Aden and mentioned that Reverend Dagger, who was then also stationed in Germany, was “the promoter of a Bird Watching Society in the 2nd TAF. I’m sure he mentioned you in connection with the occurrence of a species of drongo when you were together once.” From the colour, tail shape, size and behaviour it seems certain that this was indeed a drongo. The most likely species from the

point of view of natural distribution is the Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* that occurs on the southern side of the gulf of Aden in Somalia and Djibouti, thence south and west over much of Africa (Redman *et al* 2009 and other references).

My description corresponds to *Dicrurus adsimilis* except for four points: (1) paler edgings were not noticed on flight feathers;

Plate 1. Sketches of tail and bill shape of drongo *Dicrurus* sp, Aden, 28 October 1946, scanned from field notebook. © PWP Browne



(2) legs were described as lightish brown whereas all species of drongo are pictured with black legs in del Hoyo *et al* (2000); (3) length was estimated at 19–20 cm whereas that of the Fork-tailed Drongo is given as 23–26 cm in del Hoyo *et al* (2000); (4) some illustrations show a more deeply forked tail than appears in my sketch. In my opinion these points do not invalidate the identification as a drongo, and probably the Fork-tailed Drongo, for the following reasons. My failing to notice paler edgings to the flight feathers could have been because of my unfamiliarity with the species and being unaware of what to look for; the appearance of pale legs may have been caused by angle of view and lighting conditions; the slightly small size estimate is explainable by lack of any objective comparison; and the tail shape could have been due to the bird being a female since, “The female has a less deeply forked ‘fish-tail’” (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1960).

To have come directly from Africa this bird would have had a 250 km sea crossing, but a more likely way for an African bird to enter Arabia would have been via the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. Here the longest sea crossing is only 21 km. From there to Aden is 150 km east by land. The only other bird I recorded in the trees in the same area as the drongo on the same day was a Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, another African species that also occurs in Djibouti and Somaliland, but was seen in Aden frequently October–February (Browne 1950). A drongo of unknown species was reported on the Red sea coast of Saudi Arabia on 20 January 2014 (per M Jennings) some 650 km north-northwest of the strait. The Fork-tailed Drongo is usually described as resident but the Borrow & Demey (2004) distribution map shows areas on the northern edge of its west and central African range where it is “mainly resident but partially migratory or erratic within range”. October is in the monsoon season when such movements occur in other Afrotropical species.

Two Asian drongo species have occurred in the last 20 years in the UAE and Oman (Aspinall & Porter, 2011), the Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* and Black Drongo *D. macrocerus*. Both species are common in India but vagrants to eastern Arabia. Even a natural vagrant occurrence in western Yemen seems very unlikely. However, the location of my observation is only a km or so from Aden port, and there was frequent maritime traffic from India to Aden in that era so assisted passage would have been a possibility. The Ashy Drongo which has greyish plumage can be ruled out because the bird I saw was glossy black. The Black Drongo is bigger than Fork-tailed Drongo and has a more deeply forked tail, neither feature fitting into my observations. Also it has a white rictal spot which I probably would have noticed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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