

ADDITIONS TO THE AVIFAUNA OF KIRIBATI AND TUVALU

By PETER CHILD

After an absence of 25 years my wife and I visited Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands) from 17 July to 14 August 1981. The main ornithological purpose of this trip was to visit the two northernmost atolls of Butaritari and Makin, which I had not had the opportunity to include during my tour of duty in 1953-56 (Child 1960). We spent from 31 July to 10 August in the north (visiting Makin from 3 to 6 August), the rest of the time being on the central administrative atoll of Tarawa.

The tremendous influx of population to Tarawa (estimated 25 000 on the southern side of the atoll) has made this less worthwhile for birdwatching. However, most previously recorded species could still be found there; in particular, the Crested Tern seemed to have increased considerably, and we estimated at least 120, mainly on the lagoon side of Betio. Constant human disturbance on the ocean reefs and lagoon shallows at low tide resulted in only small numbers of Arctic migrants being recorded. One advantage (compared with Tuvalu) is that the Gilbertese people are not allowed rifle permits. Also, the Kiribati government seems to be alive to conservation requirements, as is evidenced by their enlightened policies and protection for the Christmas Island bird colonies. They have an active Department of Natural Resources.

Butaritari is a very large atoll, being some 30 km by 20 km, with many square kilometres of sand and mudflats at low tide; we did not visit the extensive tidal areas near Bikati in the north-west, nor Kuma in the far east. In the north-east there is a fascinating group of about ten tiny low-lying islets collectively known as Ubrantakoto, which apparently has not previously had an ornithological visit. This group is separated from the southernmost tip of Makin by only 3 km of open ocean. We made the crossing from Makin by launch on 5 August. The islets are sparsely covered in mangrove and three other species of low shrubs (the tallest being about 6 m). They have beaches of coral pebbles and, being devoid of coconuts, are seldom visited, thus forming natural bird sanctuaries. They harboured thousands of breeding Black Noddy (but no Browns), two small colonies of Black-naped Tern (totalling about 70-80 birds), hundreds of breeding White Tern and a thriving heronry of 50-60 adults and young (with several disused nests seen in the shrubs). We also recorded a few roosting Lesser Frigates, an immature Crested Tern and an assortment of the common Arctic migrants. It is also likely that the Sooty Tern breeds there.

Because Makin has not previously had an ornithological visit (Amerson 1969), a complete summary is given for that island. (Note that Amerson called Butaritari "Makin" and Makin he called "Little Makin"). Map details for Kiribati atolls are depicted in Amerson's bulletin.

New species recorded for Kiribati were Rock Pigeon, Blue-grey Noddy, Asiatic Whimbrel and Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit.

ROCK PIGEON *Columba livia*

On 28/7/81, at Betio (Tarawa), about 20 feral pigeons were roosting (mid-afternoon) on a shed at the wharf area. A local informant thought there were upwards of 40 altogether, always in this vicinity where they survived on scraps from shipping cargoes. He also thought some had been here since before World War II.

BLUE-GREY NODDY *Procelsterna cerulea*

On 1/8/81, at Butaritari, a single bird of this species flew in close to us on the ocean reef and then out to sea again.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

Although Amerson lists a "Whimbrel" for four Gilbert Islands the subspecies is not stated, but is most likely to be the Asiatic. On the lagoon mudflats near Butaritari village we recorded the largest group of 33 on the incoming tide on 9 August, and estimated that at least 50 were present on this atoll during the period of our visit. They are much less approachable than the Bristle-thighed Curlew (*N. tahitiensis*), which was also seen every day in small numbers.

ASIATIC BLACK-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa limosa melanuroides*

A single bird was sighted near seven Bar-tailed Godwits (*L. lapponica*) on 31 July on the Butaritari mudflats. Slightly slimmer than the Bar-tails, it had the pale axillaries diagnostic of this subspecies. It was not seen again on our other visits to this area, although the Bar-tails were present throughout the whole period.

RED-FOOTED BOOBY *Sula sula*

A bird banded in the Phoenix group and found dead at Tanimainiku, Butaritari, earlier in 1981 proved to be 18 years old.

A Bird-list for Makin, 3-6 August 1981

Makin atoll (3°20'N 173°00'E), the northern limit of the Kiribati chain, consists of a string of five main islets lying north-south, without a lagoon, and three tiny islets on the far northern edge of the reef. In the centre of the northern islet (Makin) is an interesting tidal and muddy ponded area which attracted Black-naped Terns, Crested Terns, Reef Herons and several species of waders, including the only Whimbrel recorded.

Most of the likely habitats were examined during our stay, and, as there is no lagoon, we could cover almost the whole perimeter of the reefs and beaches. Waders are rather limited and scattered because of the lack of lagoon flats and of extensive areas of stable productive sand of mudflat.

The weather was mostly fine and hot, partly cloudy, with a light to moderate easterly; heavy rain fell late afternoon on the 3rd.

LESSER FRIGATE BIRD *Fregata ariel* (Visitant, non-breeding)

One male beyond the reef of Makin islet on 4th was seen to chase a Common Noddy until the latter disgorged some food. On 5th, one seen over the ocean south of Onne.

GREAT FRIGATE BIRD *Fregata minor* (Visitant, non-breeding)

Four males beyond the reef of Makin islet on the 4th. In addition, six unidentified Frigates passed overhead while we were travelling north on Makin islet on a tractor on the 4th. It is possible that they breed on Ubrantakoto, northern islets of Butaritari.

WHITE TERN *Gygis alba* (Resident, breeding)

Common (in hundreds) throughout. Breeding (eggs and downy chicks), especially on breadfruit, pandanus and 'ren' (*Messerschmidia*) trees. Small groups coming and going from the ocean all day; flocks fishing outside the reefs.

BLACK-NAPED TERN *Sterna sumatrana* (Resident, possibly breeding)

Uncommon; total seen 9. One carried a fish from the ponded area to a juvenile on a sandbar nearby. A possible breeding site is the coral beach in the far north of Makin islet. Two breeding colonies were seen on islets of nearby Ubrantakoto, Butaritari.

CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii* (Visitant, non-breeding)

Uncommon; total seen 15. Four in various stages of moult sitting on low rocks on a beach on the 4th. Eleven roosting and fishing in the ponded area on 6th. Unlikely to breed here, but probably does so on Ubrantakoto.

SOOTY TERN *Sterna fuscata* (Visitant, non-breeding)

Only 1 sighted, off the south coast of Onne on the 5th. This species possibly breeds on the nearby islets of Ubrantakoto.

BROWN NODDY *Anous stolidus* (Common Noddy). Resident, breeding)

Common (in tens, possibly hundreds, throughout). Coming and going from the ocean all day; breeding mainly on coconut and pandanus; seemed to be eggs only.

BLACK NODDY *Anous tenuirostris* (Resident, breeding)

Abundant (thousands) throughout. Nesting throughout, especially on coconut, breadfruit and 'ren.' Seemed to be on eggs only. Coming and going from the ocean all day, with many flocks at sea fishing.

REEF HERON *Egretta sacra* (Resident, probably breeding)

Common on reefs throughout; total counted: 41. Of these 23 were white phase, 16 grey and 2 mottled. May breed on low shrubs in the far north; certainly breeds on nearby Ubrantakoto.

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres* (Arctic migrant)

Scattered throughout low-tide reefs and beaches. Total counted

128, largest group seen was 31. Various states of plumage, including a few in full breeding dress.

WANDERING TATTLER *Tringa incana* (Arctic migrant)

Scattered throughout low-tide reefs and beaches, but not very common. Total counted 33; largest group 6, otherwise mostly individuals.

SIBERIAN TATTLER *Tringa brevipes* (Arctic migrant)

A group of five among rocks on the north dead coral on the 4th; flew off with curlews when disturbed. On the same day, one perched on a dead tree in the ponded area and called loudly. No others recorded.

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis fulva* (Arctic migrant)

Fairly common throughout low-tide reefs and beaches, and grassy areas. Total counted 48; largest group 4, otherwise mostly singles. In various stages of plumage, including a few in full breeding dress.

BRISTLE-THIGHED CURLEW *Numenius tahitiensis* (Arctic migrant)

Two at the passage south of Makin islet on the 3rd; a group of nine resting among dead coral in the far north on the 4th; two single birds in the ponded area later on the 4th.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus* (Arctic migrant)

A single bird of this subspecies was stalked in the ponded area on the 4th; on taking flight it called loudly.

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO *Eudynamis taitensis* (NZ migrant)

Only one bird heard. This is close to their northern limits of migration — a few reach the Marshalls each season (Amerson 1969).

JUNGLE FOWL *Gallus gallus* (Resident, breeding)

Scattered throughout vegetated areas.

After an absence of 25 years my wife and I visited Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands) from 15 May to 17 July 1981. Most of the time was spent on the administrative centre of Funafuti, with short visits to the outer atolls of Vaitupu and Nukufetau, 5 days on Nukulaelae and 2 weeks on Nui.

New species recorded for Tuvalu were Christmas Shearwater, Audubon's Shearwater, Red-footed Booby, Asiatic Whimbrel, Sanderling, Siberian Tattler and Ringed Plover. In addition, the first known breeding colony (for this group) of the Red-footed Booby was found on Nukulaelae. Somewhat surprising was the large number (at least several hundreds) of Turnstones present throughout this period of the Arctic summer. Smaller numbers of other Arctic migrants also added interest.

Because of the growing human population influx to the capital and increasing numbers of rifle permits being issued, the shooting of birds for food is a matter for concern on Funafuti. Seabird numbers seemed to have fallen drastically there in 25 years, although this was not noticeable on the other atolls visited. The existing protective legislation is very out-dated, confusing and difficult to enforce.

CHRISTMAS SHEARWATER *Puffinus nativitatis*

29/5/81: One bird resting on the sea in the SE passage of Funafuti's lagoon took off leisurely as we approached by yacht.

AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus lherminieri*

3/6/81: One flying low between waves at sea between Vaitupu and Nukufetau. 21/6/81: One outside the reef at Funafuti. 17/7/81: One seen from a ship just north of Nanumea.

RED-FOOTED BOOBY *Sula Sula*

9/6/81: A tame bird, taken as a nestling and now 9 years old, was shown to us at Nukulaelae. Another semi-tame one, 3 years old, was said to be a female as it was bringing sticks to a breadfruit tree in the village — in preparation for nesting? 10/6/81: On the islet of Niuoko (Nukulaelae) we were shown a roosting/nesting area; at 5 p.m. 40-50 birds were wheeling above; the total was said to reach 200-300. Various colour phases were noted. We saw 5 birds sitting on flimsy nests of twigs c.20 m up in a tall "puka" (*Pisonia grandis*) tree, evidently on eggs. Other trees said to be occupied were not examined. This is the only known breeding colony in Tuvalu, and was believed by our guide to be only 15-20 years old. (I was not told of any colony during my last visit to Tuvalu in 1956). Birds are sometimes shot or taken as nestlings for food. One morning we saw five immature birds which had been killed by hitting them with a stick as they flew low over an open fishing launch.

FRIGATE BIRDS *Fregata* spp.

We recorded both Great and Lesser in various places, the Lesser being much the more common. At Niuoku islet on Nukulaelae, an estimated 300-400 Lesser came in to roost alongside the Red-footed Booby area. There are still no known breeding places in Tuvalu.

BLACK-NAPED TERN *Sterna sumatrana*

Common at Funafuti, but at Nui we saw only two. Sometimes the locals confuse it with the White Tern (*Gygis alba*) and the same vernacular name is used. On 17/5/81 at Funafuti, we noted one with a blue plastic wing streamer — a P.O.B.S.P. marking?

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

Birds in various stages of eclipse plumage, and a few in breeding dress, were common throughout our stay on all atolls visited. On Nui, where we covered all habitats the most thoroughly, we estimated c.350-400 Turnstones present on lagoon beaches and ocean reefs. On 22/6/81, between Nukufetau and Nui a single bird flew around the ship for about 5 minutes, twice landing on the railing, before heading further south-west. (Compare John Jenkins' hitch-hiker: *Notornis* 18: 130.)

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

Almost daily at Nui between 22 June and 8 July we studied three birds of this subspecies on a lagoon-side mudflat. Detailed comparisons of body features and behaviour were made with Bristle-

thighed Curlews present in the same area. We later concluded that the Whimbrel, being a much more wary bird, prefers the very extensive low-tide mudflats and lagoon-side sandbars of larger atolls (such as in Kiribati). When disturbed too much they tend to fly over the coconut fringe and "hide" among the dead coral of the ocean reefs.

No other Whimbrels were seen on our visits to other atolls of Tuvalu.

SANDERLING *Calidris alba*

29/5/81: One feeding on a sandbar on the edge of the outgoing tide at Funafala, the southernmost islet of Funafuti. Still present in the same spot next morning. 27/6/81: A group of four on dead coral of the ocean-side reef at Nui resting at high tide. We watched this group for several days: mostly they fed on small sandy/muddy flats at the base of the main sand-beach on the ocean-side (exposed at low tide). 1/7/81: Three on the lagoon-side mudflat at Nui — could have been from the above group because on 4 July we found four here, one of which tended to be a "loner." Calls recorded were *wheet-weet* (sharp and short); a short *cheep* in flight; and sharp high-pitched chittering flight calls *chickity-chick* (repeated several times).

SIBERIAN TATTLER *Tringa brevipes*

We did not examine closely the numerous Tattlers seen at all places visited. However, this species was definitely present in very small numbers; at Nui on 3/7/81 we found a group of three busily feeding on the exposed low-tide ocean reef. They kept together (and apart from Wandering Tattlers) whenever disturbed and were also more difficult to approach. *Pee-wee* calls were heard in flight.

RINGED PLOVER *Charadrius hiaticula*

On 24/6/81 at Nui on the lagoon mudflat so favoured by the Whimbrels, Curlews, Bar-tailed Godwits, Turnstones, Golden Plovers and Tattlers, we discovered this tiny plover busily feeding among a tight group of Turnstones. Later it tended to keep to itself, and when disturbed made short flights of less than 50 metres. When flushed it uttered a sharp *chee-ip*. We studied this bird on the three succeeding days; on another occasion its flight call was a sharp *cher-wee* three times. We could not find it again after 27 June.

LITERATURE CITED

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