

## Birding Trip Report

### Gan Island and Addu Atoll, Maldives

31 January – 1 February 2014



*White Tern (Gygis alba)*

I visited the Maldives' southernmost atoll group, Addu, over a weekend from Malé. My principal quarry was the White Tern, which is found exclusively on Gan, the largest inhabited island of the atolls. Also on my hit list were White-tailed Tropicbird and the Crab Plover. I scored two out of three and also four other (unexpected) lifers: Curlew Sandpiper, Saunders' Tern, Montagu's Harrier and a Shearwater (sp?)



*Aerial View departing the Maldives capital, Malé*

My flight down was with the national carrier, Maldivian (US\$100 one way). The flight (one hour) was on-time and entertaining. On crossing the equator, our hostess announced our arrival in the southern hemisphere, popped on some reggae and distributed certificates to the foreign tourists on board.

Landing at Gan, one could not but be impressed by the immaculate airport and its efficient management – a legacy of the British Royal Air Force, which made Gan its chief Indian Ocean base from 1956 – 1976 (surviving the Maldives independence as a Sultanate within the Commonwealth in 1965).

My hotel was the rather blandly named the **Gan International Resort** (US\$ 46 per night). The *resort* exceeded expectations as a colonial relic, located as it is in the former Officers' Mess of the RAF base. I was the only inmate on the two nights. I dined (alone) in a vast hall on fish and chips (the only item available on the menu), but had access to a reasonably well-stocked bar (beers \$2!). The only drawback was the lonely walk back through the spooky and overgrown parade ground to the ghost wing of the bachelor quarters, (Room 413). Now, if walls could talk....



*Photo in the hotel dining room. HM's visit to Gan (en route to Australia) in 1963. The sign above the Queen's head points to "Salisbury". Note the hem line of the officer's pants may be somewhat shorter than contemporary protocol might allow!*

Before turning in for the night, I enquired as to the likelihood of my finding any of the famous terns. My waiter, Ali, from Bangladesh, replied that they were nicknamed *Gan flies*....I took this to bed not exactly sure what he meant or what to expect....

Friday morning, I was woken by the local Muezzin just before dawn. Outside my room and over the garden, I was delighted to sight 20-30 White Terns wheeling overhead. I was later to find many more, quite tame, day roosting in the *casuarina* trees around the (former) base. I was later to discover that the tern has achieved iconic status throughout the Maldives. Indeed, just outside the grounds of the Gan base was a huge silver statue of the winged beast, landing to feed its chick with a flailing flying fish:



*White Tern statue in Addu City and detail*

Interestingly, I did not encounter any White Terns outside of the vicinity of Gan Island during my two days' birding the neighbouring atolls (Addu is actually several small coral islands connected by 14kms of solidly British-built causeway). It was a relief to finally see the bird, having failed in my four years in PNG to visit Tench Island (another isolated breeding site for the bird almost on the equator).

I rented a push bike and spent the next day-and-a-half, cycling around the beaches and mud flats of the atolls. The birds were almost exclusively shore birds and waders (new species for me in bold):

- Whimbrel - common
- **Eurasian Curlew** - a few individuals
- Common Sandpiper – very common, often grouped with Turnstones
- Ruddy Turnstone – small groups (5-6)
- Pacific Golden Plover – with common sandpiper
- Grey Plover – a few lone individuals
- **Common Greenshank** – a solitary individual
- Grey Heron – very common on sand banks, mudflats and freshwater marshes
- Indian Pond Heron - very common, mostly juveniles
- Striated Heron – relatively common
- Black-crowned Night Heron – the least common of the four herons
- Great-crested Tern – individuals fishing offshore
- Black-naped Tern – resting in small parties on exposed sandbanks
- **Saunders' Tern** – took some identification; differing from Little Tern in greater extent of white on forehead and longer and blacker outer primaries – in South Asia, only found in Maldives
- **Flesh-footed, or Wedge-tailed Shearwater** – several seen quite far off-shore gliding just above the choppy waves. One party seen close to a fishing boat (indicated by my guide book as more likely to be the latter species, but a positive ID of two near-identical birds may be rash).

In the intense heat of the equatorial noon on my second day, I took a break at a tea house and was befriended by a group of local youths. I mentioned my mission to find the Tropicbird and Crab Plover and showed the illustrations in my guidebook: "*Birds of India*", *Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp (2012)*. The trio seemed to instantly recognize my prey and hey presto, I was whisked off by Ali, Mohamed and Hussein on their motor scooters to the very end of Hithadhoo Atoll to a broad and semi-enclosed bay that had been declared as a fauna reserve (2003). Soon after arrival at the spot shown in the photo below, Hussein pointed to the sky and *voilà* my first and only **White-tailed Tropicbird** – magnificent with bold black "V" patterning on the back and a long undulating white tail.



*The 'A-team' of budding new birding pals and their machines, Hithadhoo Atoll*

Alas, attempts to locate a Crab Plover proved fruitless and we returned to Hithadhoo township for more tea and conversation. I left at 16:00 to cycle the 12 long kms back to Gan. *En route*, I stopped to visit the enormous (white elephant) SAARC Convention Centre, constructed in six months to host the South Asian Regional Summit in 2012. The Centre, already falling into disrepair, had been landscaped with large freshwater ponds on all four sides which overgrown with weed, boasted a number of new species:

- Common Moorhen - everywhere
- White-breasted Waterhen - also two squashed on the road
- Pheasant-tailed Jacana (in non-breeding plumage)

Approaching Gan, near the village garbage dump, I spied my only raptor perched on a dead coconut palm. After much observing and seeing it on the wing, I determined it was **Montagu's Harrier** - a winter visitor from north Asia and a new species for me.

As I was preapring to return to the airport, I remarked how silent the islands were without bird song. Indeed, the only other species seen were Feral Pigeons around the hotel and a few Common Myna at

the airport carpark (which eliminates the doubt of *Grimmett et al* as to the presence of Mynas on the islands – Maldives range indicated in the guidebook as a “?”).

My flight back to Malé was with Air Equator, (US\$80) on my first DC-8 since Central America in the early 1980s!...



All-in-all, a good targeted trip. Good food, nice locals and even the fish and chips would have done a British ‘fry-up’ proud. Six lifers and some more good memories.



*No-one looks very amused*