

RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD

Phaethon aethereus

non-breeding visitor, occasional

P.a. mesonauta

Unlike White-tailed and Red-tailed tropicbirds, the Red-billed Tropicbird is not regularly found in the Hawaiian Islands, occurring primarily in the subtropical and tropical Eastern Pacific (including the Galapagos Is), Atlantic, and Indian oceans, with vagrants recorded north to Britain and Washington State (Cramp and Simmons 1977, Harrison 1983, AOU 1998, Spear and Ainley 2005, CBRC 2007) and to Johnston Atoll (a pair; Amerson and Shelton 1976, *E* 18:36). Approximately 11 individuals have been recorded as vagrants to the Hawaiian Islands.

A tropicbird with a white tail and vocalizing like a [Red-tailed Tropicbird](#) over Gardner Pinnacles 27 Feb 1828 (Isenbeck *in* von Kittlitz 1834) could have been a Red-billed Tropicbird. The first verified record of Red-billed Tropicbird was of a one-year-old female of the expected Pacific subspecies, *P.a. mesonauta*, collected by Alexander Wetmore at *Nihoa*, *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands*, 15 Jun 1923 (USNM 300997; Clapp & Woodward 1968, Clapp et al. 1977, PP examination); another was reported from this island 24 Mar 2007. At *French Frigate*, an adult female, also of *mesonauta* (PP examination), was collected 15 Jun 1968 on East Island (USNM 544878; [HRBP](#) 5110 of specimen), and one photographed over Tern Island 23-29 Jan 1989 ([HRBP](#) 0832), along with observations in Jan or Feb 1990, 21 Feb 1991, and 17-21 Feb 1992 (when banded) were presumed to involve a single individual. Another well-described bird was recorded there 4 Nov 1999-9 Jan 2000.

In the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* several historical reports of Red-billed Tropicbirds (e.g., Bloxam 1827a, Gray 1859, Dole 1879, Wilson and Evans 1899, Seale 1900, Henshaw 1901a) undoubtedly pertain to [White-tailed Tropicbirds](#) (Rothschild 1900, Henshaw 1902a). More recently, single adult Red-billed Tropicbirds were observed cavorting with [Red-tailed Tropicbirds](#) over Lehua Islet NW of *Ni'ihau* 13 Jun 2008 ([HRBP](#) 5458), and at Kilauea Point NWR, *Kaua'i* 6-7 Apr 1983 (*AB* 37:915), 6 May 1989, 31 Jan 1990, 26 Feb-mid April 1998 ([HRBP](#) 1177-1185, 1245-1248, published *AB* 52:261), 14 Feb-26 May 1999, 19 Feb-mid Jun 2000 ([HRBP](#) 1310), and 21 Mar 2002. Based on consistent behavioral patterns it is widely presumed that the birds recorded at Kilauea in 1998-2000 involved a single individual and it is possible that the records for 1989 and 1990 also involved just one bird (although see below regarding birds on O'ahu). Other individuals were recorded at Kilauea Point in Jun-Jul 2009, Apr 2010 ([HRBP](#) 6325), 9 Mar 2011, and 12 Feb 2015, the records from 2009-2011 also possibly involving a single individual. On *O'ahu*, an adult was observed interacting with [Red-tailed Tropicbirds](#) along the rocky se. coast at or near Halona Pt. 3 Mar (possibly as early as 29 Jan)-29 May 2006 ([HRBP](#) 5249-5251, 5274), including landing at prospective breeding sites (e.g., [HRBP](#) 5249). Two adults returned to the area in 2007, were observed off and on from 8 Jan-16 May, and were each banded in Apr, on different legs for future identification (VanderWerf 2007a, VanderWerf and Young 2007; *E* 68:43-46). In 2008 a new (unbanded) individual observed 26 Feb-26 Jul was incubating an abandoned [Red-tailed Tropicbird](#) egg on the last date; and one was also observed near Mokumanu Islet 26 Jun, possibly the same bird observed along the se. coast. Descriptions of other possible

Red-billed Tropicbirds, from Moloka'i 21 Jun 1999, Maui 23 Sep 1990, and Hawai'i I 28 Mar 1981, did not eliminate other tropicbird species.

[Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

[Literature cited](#)

Citation: Pyle, R.L., and P. Pyle. 2017. The Birds of the Hawaiian Islands: Occurrence, History, Distribution, and Status. B.P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, HI, U.S.A. Version 2 (1 January 2017)
<http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/birds/rlp-monograph/>