

Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcatus* in Costa Rica

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Recopilamos 16 registros de 21 individuos de *Creagrus furcatus* en aguas costarricenses entre la Isla del Coco y la frontera con Nicaragua. Las observaciones indican que la especie visita el país regularmente por lo menos en el periodo entre el fin de marzo hasta el principio de mayo. Las aves son atraídas en la noche a las embarcaciones cerca de las cuales frecuentemente forrajean. El incremento en las observaciones en los últimos años puede ser el resultado de más observadores o un cambio en el comportamiento no reproductivo de la especie.

The distribution of Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcatus* at sea away from its breeding colonies on the Galápagos and Malpelo islands in the eastern equatorial Pacific is poorly understood, possibly due to its nocturnal foraging behaviour^{2,6}. Non-breeders disperse east to the Ecuadorian coast, as far north as Manabí¹⁴, and south as far as central Chile^{2,9,10}. There are no records close to the Colombian mainland⁸, but the species has been recorded sporadically in Panama^{5,13,15} and as a vagrant in California¹⁶. *C. furcatus* was virtually unknown in Costa Rica until recently. To expand our knowledge of the pelagic distribution of the species, we present sightings that suggest the species is a regular visitor to Costa Rican waters.

Observations

We compiled Swallow-tailed Gull sightings by searching for the species during pelagic trips and by contacting the local ornithological community. Most sightings were documented with photographs. In sum, we recorded 16 sightings of 21 individual Swallow-tailed Gulls in Costa Rica (Table 1). All records are from a six-week period, between 22 March and 5 May, with ten of the sightings occurring at night. Plumages recorded were a mix of breeding and non-breeding, with one subadult. Most birds, especially those seen at night, approached the vessel and either circled or actively foraged. The observations occurred along the entire length of the country from near the border with Nicaragua to Cocos Island, i.e. over 580 km (Fig. 1). These localities vary from 580 km (Cocos Island) to 1,225 km (near the Nicaraguan border) from the nearest breeding colony on the Galápagos. All birds were at least 70 km off the mainland, except one bird for which the exact locality is unknown but is presumed to be somewhat closer (Table 1).

Discussion

These observations suggest several points about the biology of Swallow-tailed Gulls. Firstly, some individuals regularly disperse long distances from

their breeding areas to forage in Costa Rica's warm tropical waters, in contrast to the cold waters of the Humboldt Current along the west coast of South America, where the species is well known to disperse between breeding periods. Observations in six different years, four of them consecutive, indicate that *C. furcatus* regularly visits Costa Rican waters, not only during periods of unusual weather. Many individuals are attracted to passing vessels (contradicting statements to the contrary⁷) which they often follow and sometimes forage near. The pattern of nocturnal activity and early-morning travel, presumably to roost sites on the water, is typical of this species⁶.

The strong seasonal pattern could be due to a lack of survey effort during other months. Swallow-tailed Gulls disperse subsequent to nesting, which occurs year-round, suggesting that dispersal could occur any time. The period when all observations

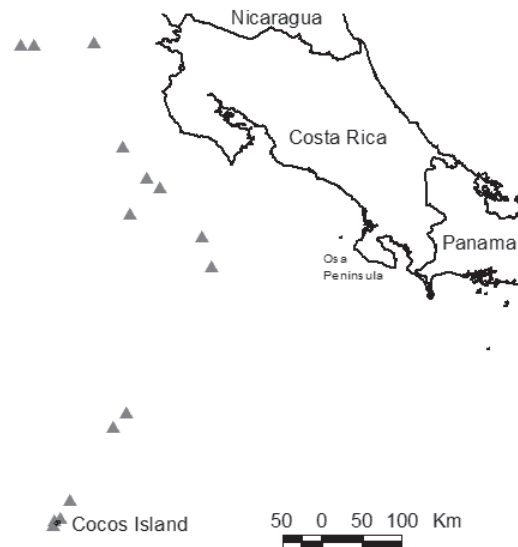


Figure 1. Locations of Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcatus* sightings off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica

Table 1. Details of Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcatus* sightings, all of single individuals, except where indicated. Coordinates listed in decimal degrees.

Date	Time	Plumage	Latitude	Longitude	Observer	Behaviour	Reference
5 May 1993	Day	—	09.55	-87.08	A. Acevedo-Gutierrez	Perched on a rock	1
7 April 2003	19h00	—	*	*	E. Castro	Approached and circled vessel	
30 April 2006**	02h45	subadult	06.60	-86.43	KE	Approached and circled vessel for 45 minutes	4, 11
1 May 2006***	05h30	breeding	05.58	-87.02	KE	Fly by	4, 11
5 May 2006	08h00	breeding	06.75	-86.28	KE	Fly by	4, 11
9 April 2007	19h47	breeding	09.73	-86.32	BEY, RG, PM, JRZ	Approached and circled vessel for ten minutes	12
22 March 2008	Night	breeding	08.72	-85.43	BM	Approached and foraged near vessel for two hours	—
26 March 2008	16h00	breeding	09.27	-85.90	BM	Fly by	—
26 March 2008	Night	breeding	08.98	-86.24	BM	Approached and foraged near vessel for one hour	—
5 April 2008	19h00–22h00	non-breeding	10.88	-87.46	BM	Approached and foraged near vessel	—
8 April 2008	20h00–23h00	breeding	10.87	-87.32	BM	Approached and foraged near vessel	—
14 April 2008	Day	breeding	10.90	-86.64	BM	Fly by	—
23 March 2009	23h30	—	08.39	-85.33	J. Lopez	Approached and circled vessel	—
5 April 2009	03h50	breeding	09.38	-86.06	BEY, RG, PM, JRZ	Approached and circled vessel	—
27 April 2009	03h30	non-breeding	05.78	-86.91	JRZ	Approached and followed vessel	—
29 April 2009***	09h10	breeding	05.50	-87.10	JRZ	Perched on rock	—

* No precise coordinates. Seen two hours after leaving the Osa Peninsula headed for Isla Coiba, Panama.

** Two individuals seen.

*** Three individuals seen.

were made corresponds to a season of calm weather when most commercial tour operators schedule Cocos Island trips, during which several of the observations were made. We are aware of few observers who venture far out to sea on overnight voyages outside this period. Nevertheless, on trips made by BEY, RG, PM and JRZ in 2008–09 to appropriate habitat, we observed the species on two of three nights during two trips in April but not once on three nights during two trips in January and September. In addition, several tracks from cruises operated during the last two decades in July–December by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to study eastern tropical Pacific seabirds and marine mammals enter Costa Rican waters, but observers apparently did not detect Swallow-tailed Gulls²⁰.

C. furcatus was not recorded regularly in Costa Rica until recently, either because the species was previously overlooked or because it has recently changed its dispersal behaviour. Apart from the NOAA expeditions, few observers study seabirds off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica except during visits to Cocos Island^{3,17,18}. Alternatively, the birds could be following Costa Rican commercial fishing vessels, which now regularly fish off of the Galápagos, as they return home.

Our observations of multiple individuals in successive years throughout Costa Rican waters indicate that Swallow-tailed Gull is now a regular visitor. Given the availability of rocky cliffs, the

preferred nesting habitat, on Cocos Island, future surveys of breeding seabirds there should also be alert for the species.

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