First record of Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* for the South American Pacific coast

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Un juvenil de *Anous stolidus* fue observado, fotografiado y filmado en La Chocolatera, Santa Elena, Ecuador, el 17 de febrero de 2009. Con base en el tamaño y otros caracteres morfológicos del ave, pudieron descartarse las otras especies del género. La localización y características del plumaje indican que probablemente se trataba de un individuo perteneciente a la subespecie endémica de Galápagos. *A. stolidus* es un ave colonial de distribución pantropical, aunque se encuentra altamente restringida a islas, por lo que este trabajo documenta el primer registro de esta especie en regiones no insulares de las costas occidentales del continente sudamericano.

On 17 February 2009 we observed a juvenile Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* at La Chocolatera (02°11'S 81°00.37'W), Santa Elena, Ecuador, the westernmost point on, and one of the most biodiverse areas of, the Ecuadorian coast[4]. The bird was seen at 11h40 from a rocky cliff using binoculars and a telescope. We could approach the bird to within 10 m enabling the diagnostic features for species identification to be noted, and the sighting to be documented with photographs and video.

Description

The following is based on our field notes, and photographs taken by CC. *Size and structure*.—Mid-sized tern, approximately the same size as Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*, with a slender, sleek appearance and uniformly dark brown plumage in flight. *Head*.—Greyish-brown crown, with paler but not well-defined forehead. Eyes black with prominent bright grey lower edge to incomplete eye-ring. *Wings*.—Long and narrow; underwing slightly paler than blackish upperparts, except brown greater coverts. Photographs revealed that the bird had some pale fringes to primary-coverts. *Tail*.—Long, wedge-shaped and darker than tail-coverts. *Bare parts*.—Legs, feet and nails greyish black, and the deep-based but pointed and slightly curved bill was dark. *Behaviour*.—It flew parallel to the shore on deep wingbeats, 'skipping' sideways above the waves for 3–5 minutes before perching on a rock. Waves forced the bird to take flight, whereupon it remained in the area for at least five minutes before departing from view.

Identification

We identified the bird as a juvenile of the endemic Galápagos subspecies of Brown Noddy based on the identification criteria in Harrison[7] and Gochfeld & Burger[3].

Noddies (*Anous*) are tropical seabirds of worldwide distribution characterised by uniformly dark plumage and a wedge-shaped tail, a feature unique among terns and gulls that occur regularly

Figures 1–2. Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, La Chocolatera, Santa Elena, Ecuador, 17 February 2009 (Carlos Camacho)

in mainland Ecuador[12]. *Anous* comprises three species: Brown Noddy, Black Noddy *A. minutus* and Lesser Noddy *A. tenuirostris*, which differ in distribution, size, bill shape and general colour tone[3,7] making species identification feasible in the field. Of the three species, only Brown Noddy is known to occur near the Ecuador mainland, on the Galápagos[15]. Lesser Noddy is mainly sedentary[3] and is primarily restricted to a few inshore and oceanic islands in the Indian Ocean, including western Australia, while non-breeders also occur off East Africa[3,8]. Based on this distribution, our record is very unlikely to have involved Lesser Noddy. In contrast, Black Noddy occurs worldwide in tropical and subtropical seas, and is often sympatric with Brown Noddy[3]. However, Brown Noddy is noticeably larger than Black Noddy, although field identification based solely on body size would be difficult without direct comparison. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account subtle differences in tail and bill shape, as well as plumage coloration. Brown Noddy has a shorter heavier bill, and a longer tail[3,7]. This combination was clearly observed in the Ecuadorian individual, thereby excluding other species. Furthermore, the poorly defined cap and pale fringes to the primary-coverts are consistent with the plumage of a juvenile.

Brown Noddy is widespread with five subspecies—*A. s. plumbeigularis*, *A. s. pileatus*, *A. s. galapagensis*, *A. s. ridgwayi* and *A. s. stolidus*—currently recognised[3]. Two of these occur throughout the tropical Pacific, with *A. s. ridgwayi* on offshore islands from Mexico to Central America[7] and *A. s. galapagensis* endemic to the Galápagos[7,14]. They differ in size and general colour, with *A. s. galapagensis* being the darkest, almost black[3]. The bird's location, at the closest mainland site to the Galápagos (540 nautical miles west of the Santa Elena Peninsula), and its general coloration (dark brown, almost blackish) suggest that our record probably involved *A. s. galapagensis* rather than a more distant population.

Distribution and occurrence of Brown Noddy

Brown Noddy ranges worldwide across the tropics, in both inshore to pelagic waters[3]. It largely breeds on islands[3] and mainland reports are few throughout its range. There have been very few observations off the west coast of the Americas[5,11,13,14], and mainland sightings are especially scarce. Wetmore[14] reported the first, in August 1934 at Puerto Obaldía, Panama (08º41'N 77º22'W) and the second and only subsequent record involved one in Sinaloa, Mexico (23º54'N 106º58'W) in 2006[10]. Reports of Brown Noddy from mainland South America are completely lacking. To our knowledge, there has only been one record of the genus *Anous* from there, at Rocha, Uruguay (34º40'S 54º09'W) in 2004[1], which was not identified to species. Both of these mainland records involved birds incapable of flight found after a tropical storm had passed.

This association with hurricanes suggests that noddies seen on mainland coasts are probably vagrants blown off course by strong winds. However, the juvenile we observed appeared to be in good condition, suggesting that juvenile Brown Noddies occasionally visit Ecuador's inshore waters. Seasonal or other movements are still poorly documented for several pelagic species in the Neotropics[9], including noddies, whose oceanic ranges remain largely unknown[3,6,7]. Our sighting thus augments our knowledge of juvenile dispersal patterns in this species.

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