

SOOTY OYSTERCATCHER

A new species for Indonesia

by

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On a recent Bali Bird Walk, two of our guests, David and Shirley Hilton, alerted me to the presence of an all black oystercatcher which they said they had seen regularly over a period of three days, 7 to 9 April 1997, feeding on a breakwater, situated a few metres offshore, at Candi Dasa, a seaside resort in South east Bali. On 12 April I accompanied my informants to Candi Dasa early in the morning, and there, on the breakwater situated just in front of the lotus filled lagoon, was the bird in question, clearly a Sooty Oystercatcher *Haematopus fuliginosus*. We observed, photographed and video filmed the unusual visitor from 07.30 to 09.00. The tide was mid level and rising.

The bird was all black, with all red, stout, blunt ended bill and fleshy pink legs. Outstanding feature was the orbital ring which was remarkably broad and yellowish (rather than reddish) orange. We watched as the bird constantly foraged for small molluscs of which there was an abundance. It was unmarked, without any sign of leg rings, flags etc. From all the evidence obtained and subsequent correspondence with R. Johnstone and J. Darnell with regard to provenance and taxonomy, I can confidently state that the bird we saw was an adult Sooty Oystercatcher *H. fuliginosus* of the race *opthalmicus* found in Northern Australia.

It was diagnosed as adult on the basis of bill shape and colour: juveniles have bill tips (about one third of total length) dusky, and basally orange pink, and rather pointed (A. Hibi in Sonobe & Usui 1993). Furthermore juveniles tend to have legs paler and of a greyish cast, whilst orbital rings appear

narrower, duller and paler orange than on adult birds. It was the latter feature that clinched the identity of our visitor as being of the generally northern subspecies *ophthalmicus*, as opposed to the southern nominate *fuliginosus*, which has a much narrower eyering (half the width of that of the northern race) of a more reddish hued orange.

That the bird was patently *ophthalmicus* might have been considered most likely, but the occurrence of either subspecies outside Australia is practically unheard of. The only record outside continental Australia is that of a single bird from Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) observed by W.H. Butler on 2 October 1983 (R. Johnstone *in litt.*). Particulars of age, race etc. were not recorded.

Only Pied Oystercatcher *H. longirostris* has been reported from Indonesia in the past, with a few records from New Guinea and the eastern part of Wallacea (White & Bruce 1986). The possibility of a melanistic individual was considered and dismissed, though there have been occasional reports of hybrids retaining a distinctly pied appearance, with some black invasion of normally white areas (J. Darnell *in litt.*).

As a footnote I may mention that I visited Candi Dasa on the afternoon of 21 April at low tide and, possibly owing to human disturbance, found no sign of the bird. Yet two mornings later, at 08.00 on 23 April, I received a telephone call from David Hilton who told me the bird was still present.

Diagnostic photographs of the first Sooty Oystercatcher recorded in Indonesia are available from the author if required. Meanwhile this species should be added to the Indonesian checklist (Andrew 1992).

Acknowledgements

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References

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Postscript: The Sooty Oystercatcher was sighted again by the author at the same site on the afternoon of 18 July 1997, presumably the same bird. This further record may indicate that the bird is over wintering in Bali (the southern winter). Independently, the editor has received a report and photograph of this bird