

A SABINE'S GULL *LARUS SABINI* OFF THE COAST OF SUMATRA

by Paul Andrew

At 15:30 hrs on the 22nd October 1984 whilst on passage off the west coast of Sumatra, a strikingly patterned Land was noticed amongst a large gathering of feeding Seabirds. The predominant species were *Sterna* terns but the flock also included Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* and Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomeles*. Gulls are extremely rare in these waters and it was not until the bird had been watched for several minutes that it was accepted as an adult winter Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini*. The coast was visible off the port side at an estimated distance of six miles and the ship's position approximately 101°30'E, 2°10'S.

The flock began to disperse when the ship was still several hundred metres away but fortunately the gull persisted on a course that brought it to within twenty metres of the observer. It proceeded to fly alongside, just off the port bow, for several seconds and finally peeled off towards the Sumatran coast.

The tri-coloured upperwing was conspicuous at a considerable distance. The contrast between the white triangle on the secondaries and the black triangle on the outerwing, and the evenness of the pure grey coverts and mantle, were distinct enough to preclude anything but an adult Sabine's Gull or Swallow-tailed Gull *Larus furcatus*."

The latter possibility was discounted as this gull was no larger than the Bridled Terns *Sterna anaethetus* and few Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata* with which it was associating.

The rump, tail, underparts and underwing were entirely white, and the only marking about the head was a well defined, dark half-dollar across the nape. The fork in the tail was slight and only noted when the bird was close to the ship. Despite the long wings, in flight the bird resembled a tern more than a gull, and which indeed it was at first assumed to be.

It is evident that this bird had completed its partial autumnal moult and was in adult non-breeding plumage. Sabine's Gull is a circumpolar breeder but its nearest known wintering area is several thousand miles to the west, off southern Africa (Harrison 1983). This is assumed to be the first record for Sumatra.

Reference:

Harrison, P. 1983 *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Croom Helm, London.

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