

## New Cuckoo Record and Vagrant Bird Sightings for the Mariana Islands (1995-1998)

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**Abstract**—Casual bird observations in the Northern Mariana Islands are reported, with new records for the islands of Anatahan, Pagan, Saipan, and Sarigan.

**Cuckoo** (*Cuculus* sp.)—This is the first recorded observation of a cuckoo in the Mariana Islands. It was observed on the island of Pagan on July 11, 1996 by the author. The sighting occurred on the west side of the island in the vicinity of the airstrip. Initial recognition was based on its quick wing beat alternating with a short glide. The bird was then observed with 10x binoculars in good light at 40 m. General characteristics noted were a total length of approximately 30-40 cm, a long tail and pointed wings, an overall coloration of grey with barring under the wings and chest. Its feet were bright yellow and it appeared to have a yellow bill with a black tip. The tail had a terminal band.

The common cuckoo (*C. canorus*) and the Oriental Cuckoo (*C. micropterus*) are two similar species that range widely throughout mainland Asia and Japan. Both species migrate to the Philippines and beyond for the winter (Massey et al. 1983). Pratt et al. (1987) listed the common cuckoo as a vagrant to Palau, and the Oriental cuckoo is listed as an uncommon migrant and winter resident in Palau and Yap. Furthermore it goes on to state that the two are "...very difficult to distinguish...by appearance alone." It goes on to state that the Oriental Cuckoo is "The most likely cuckoo to be seen in w. Micronesia." That is probably true in this case, but positive identification as to species could not be made and it will have to suffice that it was a cuckoo.

**Black kite** (*Milvus migrans*)—This is a new island record for Saipan. It was first reported by conservation officers in the vicinity of Suicide Cliffs in northern Saipan on April 19, 1996. Scattered reports of the hawk continued for one week in that area but no positive identification could be made. A positive identification was made on April 26. It was a large dark brown hawk with white "windows" or patches near the wrists. It soared with its wings in a horizontal position and its tail exhibited an indented or slightly forked shape (Fig. 1). This kite was observed, by the author, off and on for two weeks and was reported for up to two months in the

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vicinity. It could usually be found soaring the thermal updrafts above Suicide Cliffs or cruising over the Marpi area. On May 15, 1996 it was recorded on the CNMI-DFW quarterly bird survey in the same area. Another black kite was again reported in the Marpi area a year later on April 16, 1997 by V. Camacho of CNMI-DFW during bird counts. This bird remained in the area till at least May 31, 1997 when it was photographed at Suicide Cliffs by S. Vogt of CNMI-DFW. This species has one previously reported sighting on Pagan Island (Glass et al. 1990). The normal range of this species is listed as mainland Asia including Japan, south to Borneo (Massey et al. 1983, King et al. 1975).



Figure 1. Black Kite on Saipan, May 31, 1997

**Matsudaira's storm-petrel** (*Oceanodroma matsudairae*)—This is a new record for the islands of Sarigan and Anatahan. On June 9, 1997 the author saw approximately one hundred of these petrels on a trip from Sarigan past Anatahan when observations stopped due to sunset. The large numbers observed were probably a result of a typhoon in the area that was pushing many seabirds in front of it. Identification of this species was based on the all-dark color, light-brown bars on the upper-wing coverts, white fore-wing patch, and forked tail. Observations were made with 8x binoculars at ranges of 30 m or more. Glass et al. (1990) recorded this species for the Northern Islands from Guguan north and listed it as

common (Reichel & Glass 1991). This species nests only in the Volcano Islands south of Japan and migrates to the Indian Ocean (Harrison 1985).

**Grey-backed tern (*Sterna lunata*)**—This is a new record for the island of Sarigan. On boat trips to Sarigan during June 1996, Feb. 1997, May 1997 and Jan. 1998, a number of pale-colored terns with long tails were always sighted on the cliffs of the south side. They were in association with a colony of 50-100 noddys. These cliffs are situated at 16° 41' N 145° 47' E and are between a large pinnacle of rock and a large sea cave locally known as “Smoking Cave”. Until 1998 numbers sighted ranged from 2-6. In 1998 the number sighted increased to 10-14. Final identification was made from above the site with 10x binoculars on two consecutive days, Feb. 25-26, 1998. The terns observed were of medium size and elegant flight. They were white below and gray to dark gray above with the primaries darker than the back or saddle. Tail was forked with white outer feathers. The bill and cap were black with a black-line through the eye. This bird is reported from Aguiguan (Stinson et al. 1991), Alamagan (Lemke 1983), Guguan and Uracas (Clapp & Hatch 1986).

**Common black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*)**—This gull was first photographed on February 20, 1996, trying to surface feed in a roadside puddle at Puerto Rico Landfill, Saipan. It exhibited first-winter plumage characterized by a “dirty” white head with black ear spots, gray saddle with some brown in coverts, outer edges of the primaries were tipped with black, white tail with blackish sub-terminal band, and flesh colored legs (Fig. 2). This bird was observed by C. Kessler and A. Marshall. About three weeks later a black-headed gull, presumably the same one, was captured on Susupi Beach and turned in by a concerned fisherman. The bird was alert, but emaciated and too weak to fly. After a meal and an examination this bird was released into the Price Costco mitigation pond in San Jose. This gull is a rare visitor for Saipan and Guam (Reichel & Glass 1991).



Figure 2. Common Black-headed Gull on Saipan Feb. 20, 1996.

Records of this species include the collection of remains at Lake Susupi, Saipan on June 11, 1983, an adult sighted at Lake Susupi on January 17, 1984, and a sighting of a juvenile on Saipan on December 28, 1984 (Glass et al. 1990). Additional records include three juveniles photographed on Agana Bay, Guam on January 26, 1978 (Jenkins 1978) and one bird included on a list of birds of Lake Susupi in September or December 1978 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during a field trip (Glass et al. 1990).

**Eurasian or common coot** (*Fulica atra*)—One bird observed at Price Costco mitigation pond by, A. Marshall, C. Kessler and others. It was distinguished from the Mariana moorhens (*Gallinula choropus*) on the pond by its white bill and frontal shield. The first observation was during moorhen surveys in December of 1995. It resided at the pond until the end of March when the pond dried up. It is listed as a vagrant visitor by Reichel & Glass (1991), previous sightings include an 1898 (Hartert) record for the island of Guam, a 1932 (Hachisuka et al.) listing for Tinian, and a record for Saipan on Jan. 1-2, 1993 by Stinson et al. The normal range of this species is breeding in temperate Asia and migrating to East Asia, south Asia, and the north part of South-East Asia during the non-breeding months (Bhushan et al. 1993).

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