

MALDIVES

24 – 31 January 2010

Leader

Dr Chas Anderson

INTRODUCTION

Once again this was a most relaxing holiday, giving us all the opportunity to watch and photograph wildlife, almost from an armchair!

The frequency of sightings was related to the weather, on calm days there were many sightings. Excellent views were gained of eight species of cetaceans, including the local Pygmy Blue Whale.

My thanks go to Chas for organising the trip and sharing his knowledge of a wide variety of marine creatures. His evening talks on various aspects of the Maldives added greatly to our enjoyment. I am also most grateful to the crew of the Ari Queen and its attendant dhoni. They looked after us with great care and contagious cheerfulness. Many photographs were taken by Chris, some of which are appended; many thanks Chris.

Neil Arnold

DIARY

The Weather

The Maldives are renowned for light north-easterly winds in January. Unfortunately we experienced a number of days with stronger winds. While this did not affect our sea passage, I'm sure that it reduced the number of cetaceans on view.

Sunday 24th January

Having travelled from Heathrow via Dubai, we arrived at Malé at 08.30. We soon met up with Chas and the rest of the party and were transported from the airport by boat, the dhoni, our tender. As soon as we were on board the Ari Queen we sailed to the west.

Unfortunately the sea was choppy and there were no cetacean sightings, but the sun was splendid. Grey Heron, House Crow and Common Myna were the only birds noted. By late afternoon we had anchored within the shelter of Rasdhoo Atoll in time to enjoy a leisurely snorkel.

Monday 25th January

After an early snorkel, we set off south along the western edge of the Ari Atoll. By mid morning we were enjoying the antics of a pod of twenty – thirty Risso's Dolphins. After lunch we spent an hour watching 200 – 300 Spinner Dolphins, some demonstrating their spinning skills. During the afternoon Spotted and Striped Dolphins dominated our viewing. On our arrival at Bodufolholdudhoo (Ari Atoll) a snorkelling trip was soon organised. Later in the evening another animal made its appearance, a lone Indian Flying Fox. Some of us went ashore and enjoyed a glimpse of island life.

Tuesday 26th January

We made an early start, moving south along the edge of Ari Atoll. As soon as we left the Atoll we were joined by thirty or so Striped Dolphins. Later in the morning we encountered 80 -100 Striped Dolphins in very playful mood. The afternoon was largely spent watching a very demonstrative pod of Pilot Whales and then a group of ten Bottle-nosed Dolphins. Our final sighting of the day was of thirty Spinner Dolphins. Once again we snorkelled as soon as we arrived at Dhigga in Ari Atoll.

Wednesday 27th January

After a snorkel, featuring a Hawksbill Turtle, we sailed south again, accompanied by 50 – 80 Spinner Dolphins. Twenty five to thirty Risso's Dolphins then took the stage, providing immense entertainment. Lunch was slightly delayed as we watched seventy – ninety Striped Dolphins.

Immediately after lunch our pulse rate quickened as we came across a female and a juvenile Pygmy Blue Whale, the smaller sub-species inhabiting the Indian Ocean. In just over half an hour we enjoyed four sightings of these ocean giants.

The finale was provided by flocks of Black-naped Terns and Common Noddies as we approached Minimasgali within Ari Atoll.

Thursday 28th January

Though still sunny, the weather changed, a brisk north-east wind making the sea choppy. Although we were 'on watch' all day there were no cetacean sightings. The most significant sightings of the day involved a marlin chasing a garfish which although leaping clear of the sea several times was eventually 'run to ground'. A sailfish was also seen.

Sadly the 'bird of the day', a Red-footed Booby, was a bird that had originally been in captivity, having been captured by a fisherman, probably in the Seychelles. At least it was pleasing to see that it was free and capable of fishing.

We finished the day at Dhungethi in the south of Ari Atoll.

Friday 29th January

In the morning it was choppy once again as we explored the area to the west of Rangali Island. After a great deal of searching, some of us glimpsed a Whaleshark. Sadly it disappeared but we did enjoy a close view of a large Manta. We were very pleased to see an unusually large pod (25- 30) of Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin, a sleek, smaller cousin of the Bottle-nosed Dolphin.

Later in the morning we caught up with a pod of 30 -40 Spinner Dolphins. More snorkelling at Dhiggiri on the eastern side of Ari Atoll ended the day.

Saturday 30th January

The day started with a short sail to the Finolau island – a sandbank in the middle of a coral reef. The bird-watching was interesting; Black-naped Terns and Brown Noddies were noted as was a flock of eight small terns which were probably Saunders's Terns. They were not too close, though, so they could have been Little Terns. The 'bird of the week' was a Sanderling which spent the whole time we were snorkelling running about the island. This is the first record of this species in the islands on a Travelling Naturalist trip.

The rest of the day was spent crossing the choppy waters between Ari Atoll and our anchorage off Malé Atoll. A huge pod of 400- 500 Spinner Dolphins joined us off Malé. They were particularly active so this was a wonderful finale to our trip.

Sunday 31st January

An early start enabled us to return to Heathrow by the early evening.

CHECKLIST

BIRDS

HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNS

Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Twelve 24th -25th
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SANDPIPERS

Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	One 30th
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GULLS & TERNS

Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	Fourteen on three days
Saunders/Little Tern	<i>Sterna saundersii/albifrons</i>	Eight 30th
Brown (Common) Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Thirty on two days

CUCKOOS

Asian Koel	<i>Endynamys scolopacea</i>	Heard on the islands
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CROWS

Indian House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Common
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STARLINGS

Common (Indian) Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	A few around the airport Malé
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MAMMALS

Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus giganteus</i>	One 25th
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CETACEANS*

Pygmy Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus indica</i>	A female and juvenile 27th
Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	25 – 30 29 th
Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Ten 26th
Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuate</i>	Seven 25th
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	230 – 280 on three days
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella Longirostris</i>	710 – 950 on five days
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	25-30 26th
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	20 -30 on 25 th , 24-30 27th

* Small groups were counted, larger groups estimated