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First record of Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) for Aruba

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Photo: Robert L. Norton

First record of Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) for Aruba

Steven G. Mlodinow¹ and Robert L. Norton²

Abstract Robert L. Norton encountered a Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) approximately 60 km NNW of Aruba, providing Aruba's first record of this species. Given the pelagic distribution of this species during the non-breeding season, and nine antecedent records from Bonaire and Curaçao, additional records seem likely for Aruba, especially given an increase in reports of seabirds from cruise ships off Aruba.

Keywords Aruba, first record, non-breeding range, *Phaethon aethereus*, Red-billed Tropicbird

Resumen Primer registro de *Phaethon aethereus* para Aruba—Robert L. Norton encontró un individuo de *Phaethon aethereus* aproximadamente a 60 km NNO de Aruba, lo que constituye el primer registro de esta especie para la isla. Dada la distribución pelágica de esta especie durante la época no reproductiva y los nueve registros anteriores en Bonaire y Curazao, es probable que Aruba tenga registros adicionales, especialmente dado el aumento de avistamientos de aves marinas desde cruceros en la isla.

Palabras clave Aruba, *Phaethon aethereus*, primer registro, rango no reproductivo

Résumé Première mention du Phaéton à bec rouge (*Phaethon aethereus*) à Aruba—Robert L. Norton a observé un Phaéton à bec rouge (*Phaethon aethereus*) environ 60 km au nord-nord-ouest d'Aruba, ce qui constitue la première mention de cette espèce pour Aruba. Compte tenu de la répartition pélagique de l'espèce en dehors de la saison de reproduction et des neuf observations antérieures à Bonaire et Curaçao, des mentions supplémentaires semblent probables pour Aruba, en particulier en raison de l'augmentation des signalements d'oiseaux marins depuis des navires de croisière au large d'Aruba.

Mots clés Aruba, *Phaethon aethereus*, Phaéton à bec rouge, première mention, zone fréquentée en dehors de la période de reproduction

On 20 October 2014, between 0800 and 0900, RLN was birding from motor ship *Zuiderdam's* promenade starboard deck and noted a sub-adult Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*; Fig. 1) in flight. The morning was relatively calm with a low sea state. While watching the booby, a notably different looking bird approached in flight at a level higher than the promenade deck. The initial oblique angle did not provide sufficient views for identification, but after the ship made enough headway, the bird's tern-like appearance plus long central rectrices clarified that it was a species of tropicbird. As the individual drew closer, RLN was able to identify this individual as a Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*). Identifying characteristics included a black eye-line wrapping around the back of the head, as well as black primaries and upperparts "marmorated" with dark gray to black barring extending from the hindneck and upper back to the upper tail coverts. Also noted were medium-length tail feathers

and a yellow-orange bill suggesting a sub-adult (Fig. 2; Voous 1983). The position was noted to be 12°57'0.9"N, 70°17'40.7"W by referring to the onboard geo-positioning display—about 60 km NNW of Aruba and apparently within the Contiguous Zone of the Netherlands Antilles off Aruba (The Hydrographic Service of the Royal Netherlands Navy 2017).



Fig. 1. Sub-adult Masked Booby observed 20 October 2014, approximately 60 km NNW of Aruba. Photograph by R.L. Norton.

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Fig. 2. Aruba's first documented Red-billed Tropicbird, 20 October 2014, approximately 60 km NNW of Aruba at 12°57'0.9"N, 70°17'40.7"W. Photograph by R.L. Norton.

The Red-billed Tropicbird has a somewhat patchy, nearly pantropical distribution, with a worldwide breeding population fewer than 8,000 pairs (Lee and Walsh-McGehee 2000). In the Caribbean, this species is considered local and uncommon, breeding predominantly on the Lesser Antilles and on islands off the northeast coast of Venezuela (including Tobago), and to a lesser extent on Puerto Rico and along the Panama coast (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, AOU 1998, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). The West Indian breeding population was estimated at 2,500–3,500 pairs in the late 1990s (Walsh-McGehee 2000). Breeding in the Caribbean as a whole occurs from November into April (Raffaele *et al.* 1998), but in Venezuela takes place mainly from February into April (Hilty 2003). After breeding, these birds are thought to disperse at sea rather than undergoing a directional migration, with a non-breeding distribution that is poorly known.

Prior to RLN's sighting, Aruba had no records of Red-billed Tropicbird (Prins *et al.* 2009). Curaçao had five records, four of oiled birds or birds at sea, all from October through February, and Bonaire had four records, three of dead birds or birds at sea, all from May through July (Prins *et al.* 2009).

Given the records from Curaçao and Bonaire, a Red-billed Tropicbird in Aruban waters is not unexpected, especially as

more birders report from cruise ships, which allow observers better access to offshore waters. Prior to 2009, only one of Aruba's six Masked Booby records were at sea (Prins *et al.* 2009). Subsequently, an apparent increase in observer effort from cruise ships has led to 11 additional Masked Booby records, involving 38 birds as of 15 June 2015; all of these have been at sea, mostly from cruise ships (eBird 2015). Given the increased observer effort, it would seem that additional records of Red-billed Tropicbirds, especially during the non-breeding season, are likely forthcoming.

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Erratum: First record of Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) for Aruba

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Erratum The observation in Mlodinow and Norton (2017) does not represent the first record of Red-billed Tropicbird for Aruba.

Wells, J.V., E. Albers, M. Oversteegen, S. Oversteegen, H. de Vries, and R. Wellens. 2022. Status of the Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) on and around the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. [Journal of Caribbean Ornithology 35:83–88](https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88). <https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88>.

Errata Primer registro de *Phaethon aethereus* para Aruba • La observación en Mlodinow y Norton (2017) no representa el primer registro de *Phaethon aethereus* para Aruba.

Wells, J.V., E. Albers, M. Oversteegen, S. Oversteegen, H. de Vries, and R. Wellens. 2022. Status of the Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) on and around the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. [Journal of Caribbean Ornithology 35:83–88](https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88). <https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88>.

Erratum Première mention de Phaéton à bec rouge (*Phaethon aethereus*) à Aruba • L'observation de Mlodinow et Norton (2017) ne représente pas la première mention de Phaéton à bec rouge à Aruba.

Wells, J.V., E. Albers, M. Oversteegen, S. Oversteegen, H. de Vries, and R. Wellens. 2022. Status of the Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) on and around the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. [Journal of Caribbean Ornithology 35:83–88](https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88). <https://doi.org/10.55431/jco.2022.35.83-88>.

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