

# Breeding status of the Red-billed Tropicbird, *Phaethon aethereus* (Aves: Phaethontidae), on Jarnein Island, United Arab Emirates

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**Abstract.** The Red-billed Tropicbird, *Phaethon aethereus* breeds only on three islands in the United Arab Emirates. In March 2007, extensive searches and mapping of tropicbird nests were carried out on Jarnein Island in Abu Dhabi, UAE. A total of 217 nests was recorded of which 71% (155) were active with either chick or egg or adult bird present. Considering only those nests with birds or other signs (egg or chick) present, the 155 nests represent an almost 150% increase on previous estimates. Of the 217 nests, nearly 40% were with grown-up chicks while nearly 28% were with adult birds, either incubating or tending downy chicks. The three main hills and all small rocky outcrops with crevices are extremely important for tropicbird conservation on the island as these habitats account for more than 85% of the entire UAE breeding number. The tropicbird is a priority species for conservation in the UAE and protection of the biggest breeding site is essential for the long-term conservation of the species in the UAE.

**Key words.** Red-billed Tropicbird, *Phaethon aethereus*, Jarnein island, United Arab Emirates, breeding, conservation.

## Introduction

The Red-billed Tropicbird, *Phaethon aethereus* Linnaeus, 1758 (hereafter 'tropicbird'), is distributed from the Pacific through the Caribbean, South and East Atlantic, to the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea (DEL HOYO et al. 1996). The Middle East breeding population of the subspecies *indicus* Hume is restricted to the Red Sea, Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Aden, and is estimated at around 1500 pairs (ASPINALL 1996). It breeds in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from January to March, but only on the islands of Jarnein, Zirku and Arzanah. Although globally not threatened, the species is listed as a priority species due to its small world range (HORNBY & ASPINALL 1996). The species is known to disperse widely between breeding seasons, and juveniles are known to disperse more than the adult birds. However, little information is available on the breeding status of tropicbirds in the UAE and the only previous estimate of their numbers is based on a 1994 survey (ASPINALL 1996). Given the absence of any recent data on their numbers, we conducted an extensive breeding count during the 2007 breeding season on Jarnein island. In this paper we present the results of this survey to record breeding birds from the island, and discuss our results in the context of the conservation of this species.

## Material and methods

The study was conducted at Jarnein island in the United Arab Emirates. The island is located (24°55'N, 52.51'E) to the northwest of Abu Dhabi Island. The island is about 2 km long from