



Figure 1. Juvenile Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* at Islay on 5 July 2013. © Tor Egil Matre.

### **Letter: Ascension Frigatebirds *Fregata aquila* in Great Britain**

The recent report of a juvenile Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* seen and photographed at Islay, Argyll on 5 July 2013 (Figure 1), and possibly seen again four days later at nearby Kintyre, made the national news and focussed British interest on this family of exotic tropical seabirds. If accepted, it will be only the second record for Great Britain, the first having also been a juvenile which was found exhausted at Tiree, Argyll on 9 July 1953 and died shortly afterwards. This was originally accepted as a juvenile Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* but re-

identified 50 years later by a re-examination of the skin held in the then Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh (Walbridge *et al.* 2003).

The closeness of the dates of the two records is striking, and suggests the records could be linked to similar summer weather patterns, in particular the relatively stable extension of the Azores high pressure zone to British waters with its warm southerly/south-westerly winds along its western flank.

There have been only six previous frigatebird records accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) comprising one Ascension (as above), two Magnificent with one each in November

and December, and three frigatebird *sp.* with one each in June, August and September (Table 1; <http://www.bbrc.org.uk/resources>).

Frigatebirds are vagrants to British waters and before 2003 any frigatebird reaching Britain would have been considered more likely to be Magnificent, being the most numerous of the species occurring in the Atlantic. The careful detective work which led to the reappraisal of the 1953 Tiree bird put Ascension Frigatebird on the British list but the sole record has remained an anachronism until now. However, assuming acceptance of the Islay bird, there would then be two accepted records of each of the two species. Could Ascension even prove to be more likely than Magnificent in the future, especially at certain times of the year?

To test whether there was a link between records and weather patterns, weather records were consulted at <http://www.wetterzentrale.de/topkarten/fsreaeur.html>

for the six previous records, and compared to conditions at the time of the Islay sighting this year. These confirmed the presence of similar high pressure areas extending up to British waters, either on the sighting date or shortly before, for the Islay bird and the first Ascension Frigatebird record in July 1953 and also for the records of frigatebird *sp.* in June 1995, September 2010 and to a lesser extent in August 1960. Of course, the same weather patterns might also have assisted any Magnificent Frigatebirds which may have wandered or been driven into the eastern part of the North Atlantic, and confirmation of any trends must await positive identification of future records, especially for the late summer and early autumn period. On the other hand, the two Magnificent Frigatebirds in November 2005 and December 1998 were clearly storm-driven. Both were considered by BBRC to have been driven across the Atlantic by the remnants of Category 5 hurricanes, one of

**Table 1.** Summary of frigatebird *Fregata sp.* records accepted by BBRC.

**Date / Location / Submitted as / Outcome**

9 July 1953, Tiree, Argyll (died)

Magnificent - Initially accepted as Magnificent; re-identified as Ascension in 2003

20 August 1960, Forvie, North-east Scotland

*Fregata sp.* - Accepted as *Fregata sp.*

13 June 1995, Porthoustock, Cornwall

*Fregata sp.* - Accepted as *Fregata sp.*, presumed the same seen off Skomer, Dyfed 14 June 1995

22 December 1998, Isle of Man (died)

Magnificent - Accepted as Magnificent

6 November 2005, Flat Holm, Glamorgan

*Fregata sp.* - Presumed same as 7 November 2005

7 November 2005, Whitchurch, Shropshire (died)

Magnificent - Accepted as Magnificent

8 September 2010, Peterhead, North-east Scotland

Magnificent - Accepted as *Fregata sp.*

which (2005) was Hurricane Wilma which also led to unprecedented numbers of Laughing Gulls *Larus atricilla* in Britain (Fraser *et al.* 2007).

Thus, whilst based on only seven records, three of which were accepted as indeterminate as to species, could a pattern of vagrancy be beginning to emerge with Ascension Frigatebirds more likely to drift north on warm southerly or south-westerly winds associated with high pressure in the summer months, and Magnificent Frigatebirds more likely to become storm-driven from the Caribbean in the autumn?

The summer weather conditions under which the two Ascension Frigatebirds have occurred may also potentially assist Magnificent Frigatebirds reaching British waters from the relict population at the Cape Verde Islands. However, Cramp & Simmons (1977) quoted a 1969 reference to only 10–12 pairs remaining. By 2013 there were possibly only two adults left, with no young having apparently been reared since at least 1999, and the population was not expected to survive (Lopez Suarez *et al.* 2013). Similarly, small numbers of the Atlantic subspecies of Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor nicolli* and Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel trinitatus* may survive at Trindade Island and nearby Martin Vaz Rocks in Brazilian waters at about 20 degrees south. In 1975, the Lesser Frigatebird population was around 50 individuals but only five were seen between 1994 and 2000, and no breeding has been confirmed since 1992. The situation appears to be similar for Great Frigatebird, although in 1994 about 100 were seen around a fishing boat near Trindade (De Luca 2006). These small populations may now be extinct and appear to represent a much lower probability of vagrancy to the northeast Atlantic than either Ascension or Magnificent Frigatebirds.

The current estimate for the total population of Ascension Frigatebirds (25–32,000 individuals: Birdlife 2013) is an order of magnitude less than the global population of Magnificent Frigatebirds (200,000: Fishpool & Evans 2001), a large proportion of which reside in the Caribbean and other tropical West Atlantic waters. Whilst the difference in distances from the nearest breeding areas is not marked, with Ascension around 8,000 km from Britain compared to around 6,000 km from the Caribbean, it might have been expected that most frigatebirds in British waters would turn out to be Magnificent, given their much higher numbers. Instead different times of the year associated with different weather patterns are possibly relevant to the very small number of accepted records to date for each species. A wider review of other Western Palearctic records may be helpful in pointing to any patterns.

The non-breeding range of Ascension Frigatebird is not well documented and some birds, especially juveniles, may wander further north than previously thought. In this respect, there may be parallels with Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi* which, like Ascension Frigatebird, breeds only at one location in the southern hemisphere (at about 10 degrees south compared to 8 degrees south for Ascension) in the eastern Indian Ocean. Increasing numbers of accepted records in recent years have shown that Christmas Island Frigatebirds regularly travel north across the Equator to the Gulf of Thailand and the southern part of the South China Sea, and juveniles have occurred as vagrants further north to Hong Kong (Chalmers 2002). Satellite tracking has also shown an adult female Christmas Island Frigatebird undertook a 4,000 km return flight north during the breeding season, including direct overland flights across parts of Indonesia (James 2006).

Tracking studies have also recently been carried out on breeding Ascension Frigatebirds by RSPB staff using GPS loggers. Within the first year, these have already shown foraging to 608 km from Ascension Island with the maximum distance recorded in a single trip as 2,662 km in 60 hours (Oppel 2013).

With increased awareness of the possible species involved, and in this age of digital photography, it is to be hoped that, on the rare occasions they reach Britain, the identification and acceptance of future records of these charismatic seabirds becomes less problematic, and that future records may establish a clearer vagrancy pattern for the two most likely species.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Tor Egil Matre for permission to use his photograph of the Islay bird and to Jim Dickson, the Argyll Bird Recorder, Mary McGregor of RSPB Islay, and Jim Sim for assistance with the Islay record.

### References

- BirdLife International.** 2013. Species factsheet: *Fregata ariel*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 02/08/2013.
- Chalmers, M. L.** 2002. A review of frigatebird records in Hong Kong. *Hong Kong Bird Report 1998*: 128–142.
- Cramp, S. & Simmons, K. E. L. (eds.)** 1977. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. I. Oxford University Press, London.
- De Luca, A., Develey, P. & Olmos, F.** 2006. *Waterbirds in Brazil: A Conservation Assessment - Final Report*. Save Brasil, Sao Paulo.
- Fishpool, L. D. C. & Evans, M. I. (eds.)** 2001. *Important Bird Areas in Africa and Associated Islands: Priority Sites for Conservation*. BirdLife Conservation Series 11. Pisces Publications & BirdLife International, Newbury & Cambridge.
- Fraser, P. A. and the Rarities Committee.** 2007. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2006. *British Birds* 100: 694–754.
- James, D.** 2006. Secrets of Christmas seabird revealed. *World Birdwatch* 28(1).
- López Suárez P., Hazevoet C.J. & Palma, L.** 2013. Has the magnificent frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* in the Cape Verde Islands reached the end of the road? *Zoologia Caboverdiana* 3: 82–86.
- Oppel, S.** 2013. RSPB blog at <http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/b/biodiversity/archive/2013/03/25/seabird-tracking-on-ascension-island.aspx>
- Walbridge, G., Small, B. & McGowan, R. Y.** 2003. Ascension Frigatebird on Tiree - new to the Western Palearctic. *British Birds* 96: 58–73.

*Michael L. Chalmers, Copse House, Froyle Road, Shalden, Alton, Hants. GU34 4BZ.  
Email: chalmersam@gmail.com*