

Tropicbirds are medium-sized, white, rather tern-like seabirds mostly confined to the tropics. Distinguished from terns by their wedge-shaped tail. Sexes alike. Adults have 2 long central tail-streamers. Juveniles have black barring above and lack tail streamers. Their flight is distinctive; direct with strong steady wingbeats about 30 m above the sea. Over land, they ride the updraughts along cliffs and hills. At sea, they plunge-dive for fish and squid.

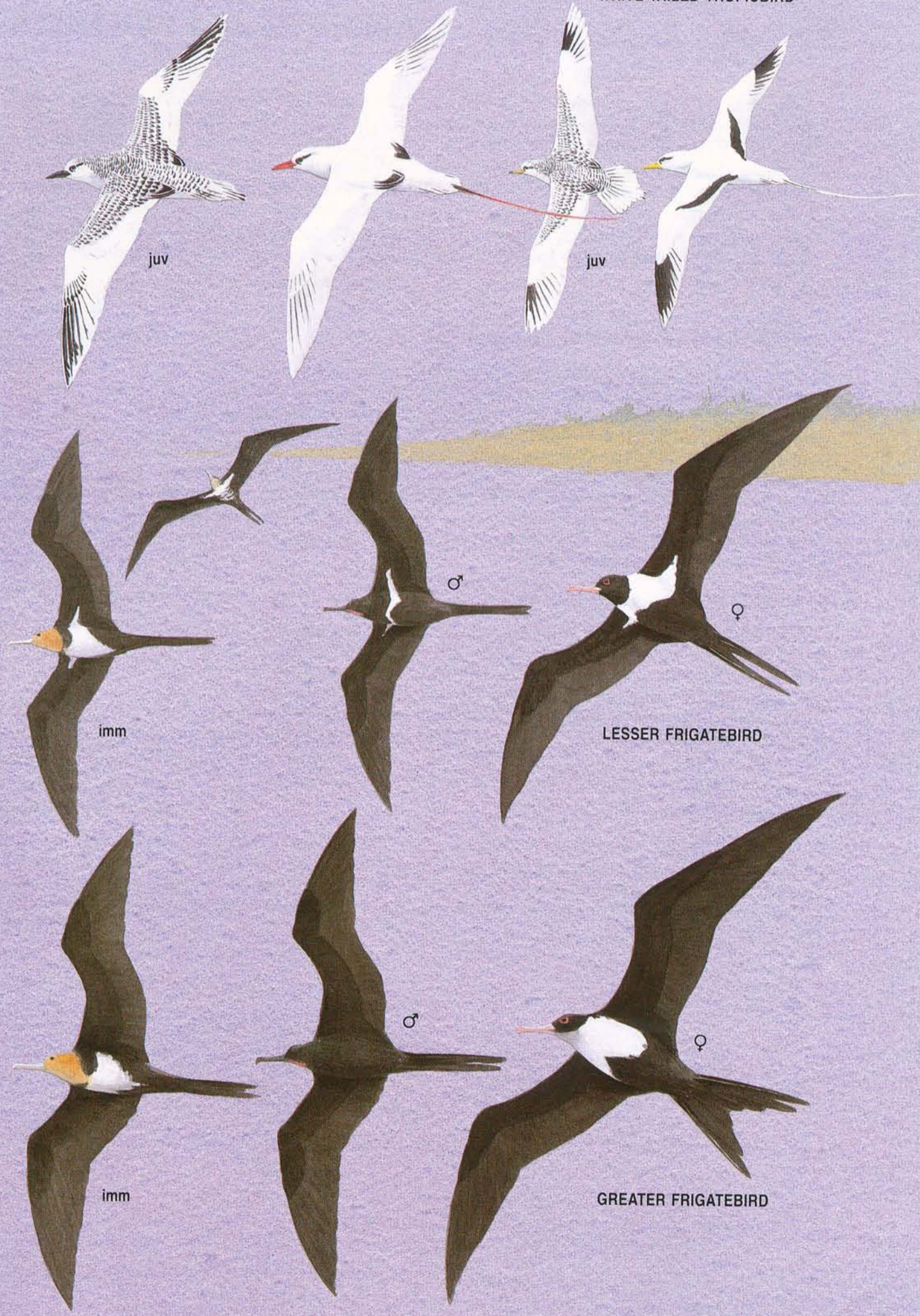
WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon lepturus*

Rare tropical vagrant

38 cm, (+ up to 40 cm for tail streamers), 300 g. Smaller and more graceful in flight than Red-tailed Tropicbird. Adult white with prominent *diagonal black band on inner wing and solid black patch near the tip of the upperwing*; tail streamers *white*; bill *yellow to orange*. Juvenile like that of Red-tailed Tropicbird but has black patch on the outer upperwing and pale yellow bill. **Habitat:** Tropical seas. [Sp 86]

RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD

WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD



TROPICBIRDS

Phaethontidae

3 species; 2 in the New Zealand region, including 1 species breeding at the Kermadec Islands.

Sailors called tropicbirds 'bos'n birds' because the projecting middle tail feathers resembled the marlin spike of the boatswain and their call is like his whistle. These white seabirds are confined to tropical and subtropical seas,

often far from land. They are usually solitary or in pairs, flying strongly well above the surface, approaching ships with a steady flight and briefly escorting them. Tropicbirds feed on fish and squid, taken mostly by plunge-diving. They breed on the ground, solitarily or in loose colonies, the density depending on available nest sites rather than social need.

86. WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon lepturus*

Plate 21

Size: 38 cm, plus up to 40 cm for tail streamers; 300 g
Distribution: Breed on islands in the tropical

Atlantic, Indian and western Pacific Oceans, and remain at sea when not breeding. The nearest breeding sites to New Zealand are

New Caledonia, Tonga, Niue and Rarotonga. Regularly seen in subtropical waters between New Zealand and Fiji. Rare vagrants to waters off the New Zealand mainland are possibly birds blown south by tropical cyclones. There have been nine records, mainly of beach-

wrecked birds on Northland coasts but as far south as the Whakatane and Taranaki coasts. At least five were immatures.
Behaviour: Similar to Red-tailed Tropicbirds but tend to accompany ships more often.