

Rarity Finders in the Field

A 'Lesser' Addition to a Greater List: Meet Malaysia's Newest Noddy

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Pelagic Birding in Malaysia

Pelagic birding -- the practice of observing seabirds from a boat in the open sea, is still in its infancy in Malaysia. Birders typically start in more accessible habitats like parks and forests before progressing to shorebirds and seabirds, both of which require specialized gear like telescopes or fast, super-telephoto lens cameras and involve exposure to harsh elements. Consequently, some birders are hesitant to step out of their comfort zones, leaving seabirds sightings and familiarity relatively low compared to land birds. Today, however, advancements in digital camera technology are encouraging more birders to venture offshore, leading to a steady increase in seabird records.

Noddies of the World

The noddies are tropical seabirds in the family Laridae, which also includes gulls, terns and skimmers. Currently, there are five recognized species of noddies in the world, all in the genus *Anous*: the Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Black Noddy *A. minutus*, Lesser Noddy *A. tenuirostris*, Blue-grey Noddy *A. ceruleus* and Grey Noddy *A. albivitta*.

The Lesser Noddy was long treated as a subspecies of the Black Noddy, although field differences between them have been known for decades. Some authors recognized them informally as distinct species based on morphological separation. A study on the molecular phylogeny of noddies by Cibois, Thibault, Rocamora and Pasquet (2016) provided the genetic evidence confirming their species-level separation. Major checklists, Clements, IOC, and HBW/BirdLife, adopted the split post-2016.

Noddies of Malaysia

For Malaysia, the most commonly found species is the Brown Noddy. Historically, there are records of another species, the Black Noddy, both in Peninsular Malaysia and Bornean Malaysia. However, the only Black Noddy record in Peninsular Malaysia has never been officially accepted. Wells (1999) listed its distribution as 'Melaka?', as it was based on a bird skin in the collection of the British Museum of Natural History labelled '*Malacca August 1865*', which is "*likely to have come off a ship and may not have been captured actually within the Straits*".

As for Bornean Malaysia, the Black Noddy is listed as a '*vagrant, but possibly breeds*' by Mann (2008). It listed four undated old records for both Sarawak and Sabah, the Black Noddy of the race *worcesteri* (distributed in the Cavilli Island and Tubbataha Reef of the Sulu Sea, Philippines). However, there are no recent reports in eBird, unlike from nearby regions such as Philippines (e.g., Sulu Sea) or eastern Indonesia, which have good photographic evidence.

Pelagic sites in Peninsular Malaysia

The sea off Tanjung Dawai, Kuala Muda, Kedah, is the best pelagic site in Peninsular Malaysia in terms of species diversity. Seabirds congregate here mainly due to the big fleet of purse

seiner anchovy fishing boats operating in the waters, benefiting from the bycatch or discards from the boats.

The Brown Noddy is the 'default' noddy species seen off Tanjung Dawai. However, it is not an easy bird to see there. Pulau Perak, a small rocky island under the Yan district of Kedah, and the westernmost point of Malaysia, is the best noddy site. Located far out in the middle of the Strait of Malacca, it is a renowned breeding site for its keystone seabird species, the Brown Noddy and Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*. On our only trip there so far, from 6 to 7 September 2025, we, my regular pelagic gang -- David Awcock, Swee Seng, Caroline Ho, Chris Gibbins, Woei Ong, and I -- saw about 250 individuals of each species. However, a long sea journey at a significant cost is needed to reach this site.

Seabirds dispersed far from their breeding sites after the breeding season. Perhaps those Brown Noddy seen at Tanjung Dawai originated from Pulau Perak. Only tagging or tracking can confirm this.

The Mega-Finds Trip

Due to easier logistics, we have been making regular trips to Tanjung Dawai during the migration season (from September to May), to look for rare migrant or vagrant seabirds. On one such trip on 29 October 2022, we had a brief encounter with a brown-coloured noddy. It was late afternoon toward the end of the trip, and after the euphoria of finding Malaysia's first Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* earlier in the day, a bird expertly spotted by Chris (a story for another day, perhaps).

The noddy flew toward our boat from the right, just above eye level, before turning sharply toward the bow. It flew away and briefly joined a flock of foraging terns before flying out of sight. All this happened in less than a minute. Fortunately, the 'sharpshooters' in the group managed to secure some clear flight shots (Plate 1). We were all thrilled because, at the time, it was our first-ever noddy, a 'lifer' for everyone on board. 'Brown Noddy' it must be, the 'default' noddy of Tanjung Dawai.



Plate 1: The noddy seen on the pelagic trip. Tanjung Dawai, Kedah, Malaysia, 29 Oct 2022.

However, as you can see, the bird (Plate 2, bird on the right) has a straighter and much thinner bill while the Brown Noddy (Plate 2, bird on the left) has a thicker bill that is slightly decurved at the tip). The bird we saw was also much whiter-headed, more lightly built, and has narrower wings. The bird is clearly not a Brown Noddy.

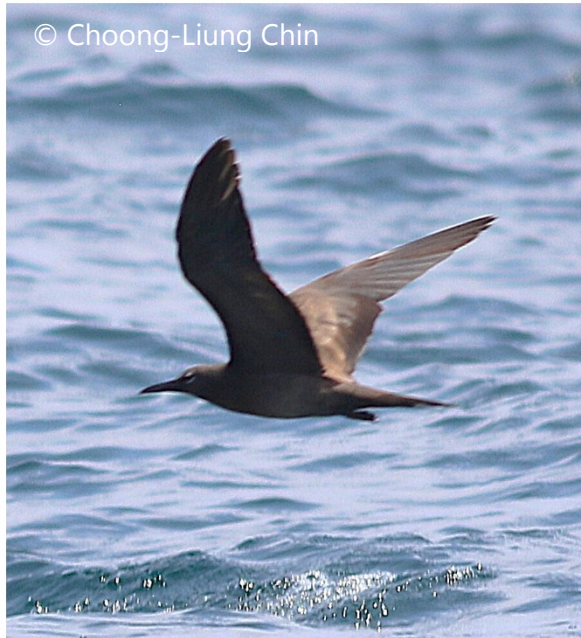


Plate 2: Brown Noddy (left), 18 May 2024; The noddy in question (right), 29 Oct 2022. Tanjung Dawai, Kedah, Malaysia.

Could it be a Black Noddy, the other noddy species on Malaysian list?

The field differences between the Black and Lesser Noddies are much subtler. The Black Noddy is slightly larger and has a thicker bill, a darker plumage tone, and less extensive pale areas on the crown and nape (Plate 3). These differences are difficult to discern without having them side-by-side, never mind seeing one in flight in a rocking boat.

However, there is a key facial identification feature between the two species: the Black Noddy has dark lores (the small area between the eye and the base of the upper bill) that are sharply demarcated from the whitish forehead. In contrast, the Lesser Noddy has white lores that merge into whitish forehead without a sharp demarcation (Plate 3).

Luckily, this critical feature was captured in our photos. Our bird in Plate 1 and 2 exhibits the latter feature and is therefore clearly a Lesser Noddy. This is the first photographic proof of this species for Malaysia. What a momentous trip, with two national-first 'mega-finds' for us!

Conclusion:

Our sighting adds a new noddy species to Malaysian list: the Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*. More images in Plate 4 and 5. Based on distribution, the Black Noddy is far more likely to occur in both Peninsular Malaysia and Bornean Malaysia waters. The Black Noddy is widespread across tropical / subtropical Atlantic and Pacific Oceans whereas the Lesser Noddy is primarily

an Indian Ocean species. This is especially true for Bornean Malaysia, as Sabah's offshore waters is right next to Philippines' breeding populations of Black Noddy in the Sulu Sea.

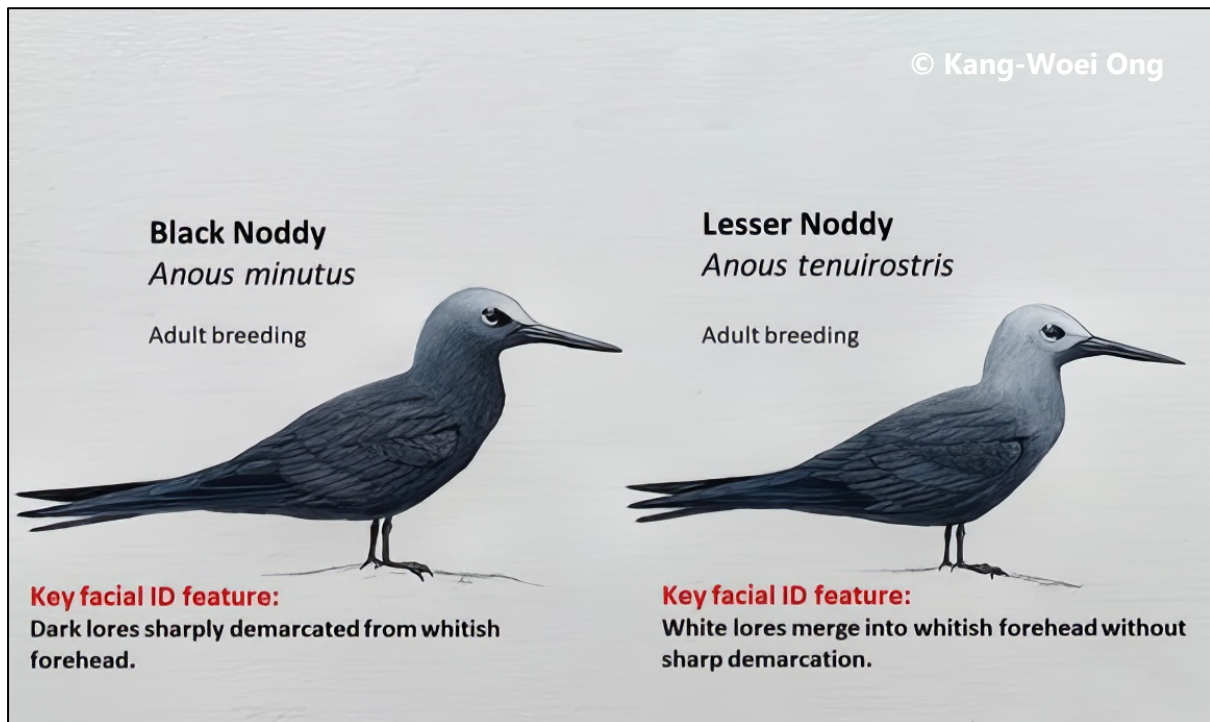


Plate 3: Illustration comparing the difference between the Black and Lesser Noddies.



Plate 4: Lesser Noddy with a Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* for size comparison. Tanjung Dawai, Kedah, Malaysia, 29 Oct 2022.

However, to date, there are only four historical records for Bornean Malaysia and none for Peninsular Malaysia. Both species are, at best, rare vagrants to Malaysian waters, making the lack of recent records unsurprising. However, this may also be a result of under-recording due to the scarcity of pelagic trips and regular seabird surveys.

Could the Lesser Noddy be more likely in Peninsular Malaysia waters than the Black Noddy? This is perhaps not a valid question after just one find, and one find certainly cannot answer it.

These gaps in knowledge and many rare vagrants yet to be discovered provide strong incentives to go pelagic birding. You could get the first Black Noddy for Peninsular Malaysia or the first photo-backed record of a Black Noddy in Bornean Malaysia. And as the saying goes, 'birds fly' -- so perhaps you could find Bornean Malaysia's first Lesser Noddy!

Let's go pelagic. Mega finds are the incentives, and at the same time, we can help improve our understanding of the seabirds of Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

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Plate 5: Lesser Noddy foraging with White-winged Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus*. Tanjung Dawai, Kedah, Malaysia, 29 Oct 2022.