



Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 18, no. 1 • Jan/Feb 2006

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A Bird in the Hand

BY CHRIS GASKIN AND KAREN BAIRD

New Zealand, a 2,000-kilometer-long chain of islands set in the vastness of the Great Southern and Pacific Oceans, has the most diverse seabird community in the world, with no fewer than 85 species (95 different taxa) breeding in the region. This includes 35 endemic species and 49 endemic taxa. In addition to the breeders, many other seabirds visit New Zealand waters throughout the year, birds that breed close to Antarctica or on other islands of the Great Southern Ocean and the tropical Pacific. In short, New Zealand is an international seabird hotspot!

Most of New Zealand's seabirds breed on offshore islands along the coast of the three main islands, the subantarctic islands to the south, and the Chatham and Kermadec Island groups to the east and northeast. Before human occupation, New Zealand would have been a seabird paradise of extraordinary magnitude, as demonstrated by bones found in caves by paleontologists Trevor Worthy, Richard Holdaway, and Alan Tennyson. Unlike today, seabirds were likely breeding in most coastal locations, some even far

inland. But changes starting some 900 years ago, including introduced predators, hunting, forest clearance, and habitat changes, decimated populations on the main islands. Fortunately, though the arrival of humans reduced seabird numbers hugely, the overall variety has probably changed little, with possibly two or three seabird species having gone extinct in the last 1,000 years. Some species, however, remain at very small numbers on isolated, often vulnerable islands.

One bird thought to be extinct was the New Zealand Storm-Petrel. This enigmatic bird is known to science from just three specimens: two collected off East Cape in 1827, now in the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris, and a third collected in 1895 somewhere between the Hauraki Gulf and Banks Peninsula, now in the British Museum. Throughout the twentieth century, scientists were uncertain whether these specimens represented a variant or subspecies of Wilson's Storm-Petrel, a distinct species *Oceanites maorianus*, or an entirely separate genus *Pealeornis*.

Discovery

With no further records for over 100 years, either at sea or as beach-wrecks, the New Zealand Storm-Petrel was presumed to be extinct, and the bird slid into obscurity. Until 2003, that is, when seabird enthusiasts on a trip out of Whitianga spied a black-and-white storm-petrel, which was photographed by Brent

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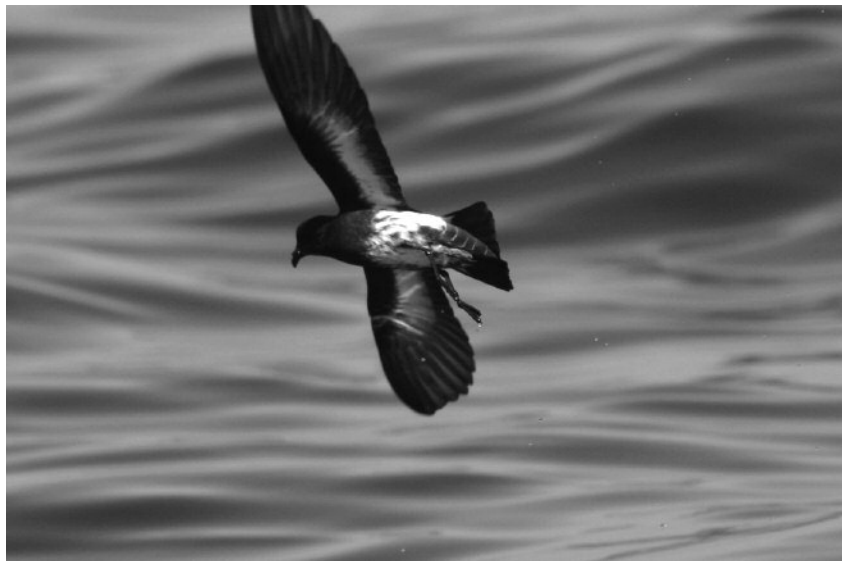
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Stephenson. At first, they thought it was either a White-bellied or a Black-bellied Storm-Petrel, but Alan Tennyson of the Museum of New Zealand suggested the possibility of the New Zealand Storm-Petrel; comparisons with the New Zealand ornithologist Ian Southey's recent photographs of the specimen record seemed promising. More birds were seen and photographed at sea in November 2003, this time in the Hauraki Gulf by Bryan Thomas and Bob Flood.

Since then, similar black-and-white storm-petrels have been observed many times on seabirding trips in the Hauraki Gulf; we have also observed them farther off the North Auckland coast in April and May, after they appear to have left the Hauraki Gulf. From our observations, it appears that these birds follow a seasonal pattern similar to White-faced Storm-Petrel, the other breeding storm-petrel of the Hauraki Gulf: they breed from October to April, then leave New Zealand waters, perhaps traveling as far as the tropical Pacific. However, despite some excellent photos of the birds, not all critical features could be examined closely enough, and irrefutable evidence that these living birds matched the specimens remained elusive. More fundamen-



Smaller than the White-faced Storm-Petrel, the black-and-white New Zealand Storm-Petrel has a white belly with diagnostic dark streaking. Photo © Marcus Lawson

tally, it was still impossible to determine the precise relationship between these birds and other storm-petrels. What was needed was a bird in the hand.

On November 5, 2005, a small black-and-white storm-petrel flew into the well-lit cabin of a fishing boat anchored in the shelter of Little Barrier Island. The skipper, Geordie Murman, captured the bird—no great task, as it landed on his shirt when he and the crew were sitting down to dinner. Formerly with the New Zealand Wildlife Service, Geordie is familiar with New Zealand seabirds and recognized this bird as one of the storm-petrels we'd been tracking in the Hauraki Gulf. He placed it in a cardboard box and contacted us through Brett Rathe, a skipper we work closely with. The next morning, the bird was photographed and

measured by Richard Griffiths of the Department of Conservation and Karen Baird of Pterodroma Pelagics; they also collected a feather louse and samples for DNA analysis, and banded the bird on the right leg. The bird flew strongly out to sea when it was released an hour and a half later.

Analysis

Was this individual the same as the specimens known as New Zealand Storm-Petrel? The bird was clearly not any of the other storm-petrels of the region, differing from each of them in the following ways:

Wilson's Storm-Petrel is similar in overall length, underpart color, underwing color, and yellow webs, but has different body/wing proportions.

Elliot's Storm-Petrel is smaller, with dark underparts and a white patch on the central belly only, and has a mostly dark underwing with a pale-gray central area; its webs are yellow.

Black-bellied Storm-Petrel is much larger (at least 20g heavier) and has different body/wing proportions; the upperparts are dark, and there is white on the underparts and rump; the webs are black and the claws blunt and flattened.

White-bellied Storm-Petrel is also much larger, has different body/wing proportions, and lacks foot projection; the webs are black and the claws blunt and flattened.

Gray-backed Storm-Petrel appears to have slightly different body/wing proportions, including shorter, broader wings; the upperparts, including the rump, are gray, with a blackish head; most are white-bellied, though some show streaking.

White-faced Storm-Petrel is larger and has different body/wing proportions; it shows brown-gray upperparts and a white belly, with some birds showing slightly streaked flanks; the rump is pale gray or, in the Kermadec subspecies, white; the tail is slightly forked rather than slightly rounded, as in the captured bird.

Comparisons between the captured bird and the specimens of New Zealand Storm-Petrel have resulted in what we believe is an excellent match in measurements, proportions, and plumage details. In other words, this captured bird and the others we have seen in the Hauraki Gulf since 2003 are the same species as the three New Zealand Storm-Petrel specimens housed in France and England.

At the same time, the bird in the hand does raise some intriguing questions, particularly about its relationship to other storm-petrels. This is still an early stage in the study of this bird, and we (along with others in the project, including Mike Imber and Richard Griffiths) are currently writing a description and analysis for publication. We are also mindful that too much emphasis should not be placed

on a single bird, and additional captures and comparative morphological study, together with DNA analyses, will surely shed more light on what has already been a fascinating journey.

If the New Zealand Storm-Petrel truly has survived, why were there no sightings between the 1890s and 2003? It is possible that birds were, in fact, seen during this apparent hiatus, but were identified as something else. Relatively few experienced observers were out on the Hauraki Gulf, and most boats have not visited the outer Gulf where the birds are now seen. Small storm-petrels are hard to see at a distance in most conditions, and chumming was not used to draw seabirds closer to boats in the Hauraki Gulf before November 2003; the increasing use of photography, particularly digital photography, has also made it more likely that birds observed would actually be identified. It is possible, too, that these recent sightings reflect an increase in the population of New Zealand Storm-Petrel, which may be recovering from near-extinction and has now reached the point that it is more easily detected.

The Future

Attempts to capture more of these birds were made in November and December 2005 by seabird scientist Mike Imber and two volunteers, who set up a floodlight on one of the Mokohinau Islands to attract birds to the ground. Though no New Zealand Storm-Petrels were captured with this technique, Mike Imber did see one close enough to identify it over land.

In early January 2006, a team led by local Department of Conservation staff including Richard Griffiths was able to capture three birds at sea. These birds have been fitted with transmitters, and will be tracked in an effort to locate their breeding grounds. Information from these birds will add considerably to our knowledge of this very special and still mysterious species.

Unfortunately, seabird research has plummeted towards the bottom of the Department of Conservation's priority list in recent years, an extraordinary situation for a country where seabirds are such a key component of the native fauna. Funding for this project comes mainly from private individuals and local DOC offices where interested staff members with responsibilities in the Hauraki Gulf area have some discretionary funds; the project relies heavily on volunteer efforts. Perhaps the New Zealand Storm-Petrel will one day be as prominent in the popular consciousness as the Kakapo, New Zealand's flightless nocturnal parrot, or the flightless gallinule the Takahe, and perhaps then there would be no limit to the funding devoted to discovering more about a bird thought to be extinct for more than a hundred years.

Chris Gaskin and Karen Baird are seabird specialists with Pterodroma Pelagics and Kiwi Wildlife Tours, New Zealand. For more information about the New Zealand Storm-Petrel, or to reach the authors, visit www.nzseabirds.com.

BANGOR 2006: Birding in Maine with Physical Limitations

BY BILL MAYNARD

*"Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends...
Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends..."*
– The Beatles

Sharon was at the back of the line when the call went up: "Hurry up before it flies!" But Sharon couldn't hurry. Her asthmatic lungs, struggling with the pollen-laden air, slowed her down, and as she rounded the bend, Sharon found her friends celebrating their sighting with high fives and pleased laughter. And the bird was gone.

Why, Sharon wondered, were there no trips for people like her, interested, intelligent birders with physical limitations that kept them from walking long distances at high speed?

For birders like Sharon, some of the best news of the year is in the 2006 ABA Convention Brochure. For the first time, ABA will be offering a Physical Limitations Track at the Bangor, Maine, Convention this June, including field trips to some of the best birding sites in the state, by land and by sea. The trips have been carefully designed by Darlene Smyth, the field trip coordinator from last year's Tucson Convention, who has recruited well-known professional birders as leaders, including Victor Emanuel and Barry Lyon of VENT, Rick Wright of Aimophila Adventures, and Wayne Peterson of Field Guides Incorporated and Massachusetts Audubon Society; one of the excursions will be an exciting pelagic trip for alcids, terns, and whales aboard the stable catamaran *Friendship V*. Add in the extremely informative workshops, convivial dinners, and other social activities, and you can see why Sharon and other birders of all ages and abilities are so eager for Maine!

To ensure an outstanding Convention experience, there are only 10 spaces available in the Physical Limitations Track. Come join Sharon and the other wonderful ABA members who will be enjoying the camaraderie of our ABA Convention, June 19-25, in Bangor, Maine. Full details and registration forms are online at www.americanbirding.org/mtgs/conventions/2006bangor/, or you can be in touch with Darlene Smyth at smythd@comcast.net or at 520/297-2315 (Mountain Standard Time). See you in Bangor!