

RECENT RECORDS OF THE DARK FORM OF THE SOFTPLUMAGED PETREL  
*PTERODROMA MOLLIS* FROM THE SUBANTARCTIC

M. SCHRAMM

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Dichromatic plumage variation is found in several species of *Pterodroma* petrels: Kermadec Petrel *P. neglecta*, Trinitade Petrel *P. arminjoniana*, and Blackcapped Petrel *P. haastata* (Murphy 1936, Murphy & Penroyer 1952). A dark form of the Softplumaged Petrel *P. mollis* has been recorded at a few Subantarctic localities (Table 1). This note documents recent records of dark form *mollis* including the first for Marion Island (46 54S, 37 45E) in the Prince Edward group.

Dark form *mollis* vary in colour from sooty grey overall in the extreme form (Mathews & Gordon 1932, Swales 1965) to individuals with broad dark chest bands and heavily streaked underparts (Elliott 1954). This is in contrast to the normal *mollis* which has white underparts and a chest band of variable extent (see Clancey *et al.* 1981).

At Marion Island, Rand (1954) recorded dark form *mollis* as abundant. This record has been widely discounted (see Murphy (in Rand 1954), Bourne 1957, Elliott 1957, Swales 1965, Clancey *et al.* 1981) as due to confusion with the sympatric Kerguelen Petrel *P. brevirostris*. However, A.J. Williams and A.E. Burger (pers. comm.) captured an extreme dark form *mollis* at Marion Island during January 1974. The bird was identified on the basis of the flesh coloured legs (see Elliott 1957, Swales 1965). During December 1979 I found a dark form *mollis* occupying a burrow with a bird with normal plumage. The birds were probably nonbreeders, since the nest was unlined and during subsequent visits no egg was found. The dark bird was typical of the extreme dark form of *mollis* described by Mathews (1932) and Swales (1965). Its overall appearance was very like a diminutive Greatwinged Petrel *P. macroptera* (see also Sinclair 1978).

Serventy *et al.* (1971) consider *brevirostris* and the dark form of *mollis* indistinguishable at sea. However, although difficult, flight behaviour, underwing pattern and body shape are good characters for separating the two species (Sinclair 1978). In the African sector of the Southern Ocean A.M. Griffiths (pers. comm.) identified one dark *mollis* during May 1979 and four during February-March 1980. All these birds were seen at close range (within 300 m of the ship) and were in the company of normal *mollis*.

The dark form of *mollis* seems to be extremely rare. At Marion Island I found only one dark bird compared to over 150 normal individuals. At Gough Island Swales (1965) recorded a similar low frequency and Clancey *et al.* (1981) found no dark *mollis*

TABLE 1

PUBLISHED RECORDS OF THE DARK FORM OF THE SOFTPLUMAGED PETREL *PTERODROMA MOLLIS*  
FROM THE SUBANTARCTIC

Locality	Remarks	Source
southern Indian Ocean 36 08S, 88 55E	named <i>Pterodroma deceptornis</i>	Mathews (1932)
Tristan da Cunha 37 15S, 12 30E	small breeding colony	Elliott (1954)
Gough Island 40 20S, 20 10E	one female captured	Swales (1965)
Between Marion Island and Cape Town	sight records of four individuals	Sinclair (1978)

although they examined over 100 birds. In the African sector of the Southern Ocean during February-March 1980, A.M. Griffiths (pers.comm.) saw 1 371 *mollis* at close range and only four of these were dark birds. In some other *Pterodroma* species exhibiting dichromatic variation, the dark form is well represented (Murphy & Pennoyer 1952). For instance, at Kermadec Island, Murphy (1936) found 40 % of the *neglecta* population to be dark birds.

Bourne (1966, 1975) suggests that the dark form of *mollis* may be the result of hybridization with *brevirostris*. However, dark *mollis* share no morphological or behavioural characters with *brevirostris*, which might suggest hybridization. Dichromatic variation, well established in some *Pterodroma* species, is so unusual in *mollis* that Clancey *et al.* (1981) consider it an exaggeration to call *mollis* a polymorphic species and, as suggested by Harper (1973), dark plumaged birds may just be rare individual variants.

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*M. Schramm, Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa.*

Present address : *Zoology Department, University of Transkei, Private Bag X5092, Umtata, Transkei.*



*Soft-Plumaged Petrel (Dark Phase)*