

# SIGHTINGS OF NEW AND RARELY REPORTED SEABIRDS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN WATERS

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## INTRODUCTION

As a fisheries biologist I took part in a number of voyages on research and fisheries vessels in the fishing areas off Angola, Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique from 1966 until 1990. Some of the ornithological results of these voyages have been published (Lambert 1967, 1968, 1969, 1971, 1975a, 1975b, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1988), but the majority of my data has not yet been reported.

The following list deals with eight records of rarely reported seabirds from the offshore regions from Angola to southern Mozambique from 1968 until 1988. Several species are newly recorded for their respective countries.

## NORTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS *DIOMEDEA (EPOMOPHORA) SANFORDI*

An adult Northern Royal Albatross followed the ship for a short time northward on 2 November 1985 at position 15°14'S, 11°40'E west of Namibe, southern Angola. Because the bird followed very closely it was possible to see all the typical characteristics of this species. Size was as for a Wandering Albatross *D. exulans*, with an entire white body, blackish upper-wings without any white, and even the dark cutting edges on the bill were clearly visible (cf. Harrison 1985, Maclean 1985, Newman 1990). Dean (2000) does not mention the Royal Albatross for Angola, so this record must be the northernmost for the species in the eastern Atlantic Ocean (Enticott 1986), as well as being the first record for the country.

## GREY-HEADED ALBATROSS *THALASSARCHE CHRYSOSTOMA*

Single juveniles were seen among hundreds of other seabirds close to the ship feeding on offal on 28 May 1968 at 18°55'S, 11°35'E off northern Namibia (Lambert 1968) and on 6 November 1972 at 27°24'S, 14°28'E off southern Namibia. The dark grey head and the very dark under-wings distinguished these birds from the Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* which was present in numbers at the same time around the ship.

There are very few other records of this species from Namibian waters. Williams (1987) and Komen *et al.* (1988) report a juvenile seen close to the shore at 25°44'E, 14°50'E off southern Namibia during August 1986. A fresh corpse of an adult was found on the shore c. 20 km north of Swakopmund at 22°29'S,

14°28'E on 20 November 1993 (D. Boyer *in litt.*). The corpse, the first specimen for the country, has been accessioned as NM 4383 in the State Museum, Windhoek, Namibia.

## BARAU'S PETREL *PTERODROMA BARAUI*

I recorded Barau's Petrel in Mozambican waters on 13 and 14 November 1987. One bird of this species, possibly the same individual each day, passed our ship (a shrimp trawler) very closely but did not fly into the swarm of about 1000 seabirds, mainly White-chinned Petrels *Procellaria aequinoctialis*, Great-winged Petrels *Pterodroma macroptera* and Wilson's Storm Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*, which followed us for offal at 25°48'S, 34°46'E in the south-eastern outer Delagoa Bay, southern Mozambique. I observed this bird in very good light conditions and saw all the features described below for the South African birds, in this case including the black line on the under-wing. This was my first contact with Barau's Petrel and in my diary I wrote that the dark black cap contrasting with the white face recalled Stejneger's Petrel *P. longirostris*, a species I have often seen in the south-eastern Pacific Ocean, although the latter is distinctly smaller.

On 18 October 1988 I identified two Barau's Petrels which stayed for a short time at a range of about 50 to 150 m from the vessel at 29°08'S, 32°23'E off KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. One bird flew to the south-east; the other sat down for a few seconds on the water and then followed the first. Good light conditions allowed me to recognize most of the characteristics, and immediately after the sighting I made a sketch and a short description in my diary. All the characteristics I recorded only describe Barau's Petrel; no other species in this region has such or similar markings. Diagnostic features were the white belly and under-wings, the latter with distinct blackish margins at the edges and dark tips (I could not clearly see the black line on the under-wing running from the carpal to the axillaries), upper-parts grey with a blackish M-shaped line crossing the opened wing (not well illustrated but described in the text by Harrison 1985 and well illustrated by Sinclair & Langrand 1998), crown and nape blackish, face white, bill dark and proportionally short, feet and legs not seen, size between Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis* and Great-winged Petrel *P. macroptera*. Similar species I know are the 'cockilaria' gadfly petrels from the Pacific Ocean, but they are generally smaller.

The published distribution pattern of Barau's Petrel in the Indian Ocean does not include the seas off southern Africa. The species is a summer breeder and breeds on Réunion Island, with one nest

found in 1974 on Rondrigues far east of Mauritius (Jouanin & Gill 1967, Brooke 1978, Stahl & Bartle 1991, Barré *et al.* 1996). It is possible that the species previously bred on Amsterdam Island, as a large number of bones found there at several sites suggests (Worthy & Jouventin 1999). The species' distribution during the non-breeding season (April–November) is not completely known but the most important areas are the tropical and sub-tropical parts of the Indian Ocean. Stahl & Bartle (1991) have analysed the known reports and found that non-breeders in winter are widespread north-east and east of the breeding islands as far as the Arabian Sea (north of the equator), Sumatra and western Australian waters (cf. van den Berg *et al.* 1990). The authors recorded only a couple of individuals south of Réunion during winter. On transects from Réunion Island to the SSW and SE until 43°S there were no Barau's Petrels in July–August; the first appeared in greater numbers southward until 35°–37°S from September onwards, when the breeders came back or were feeding during the breeding season. This agrees with the statements in Frost *et al.* (1976) and Frost (1981), who found the feeding grounds to be 1200 to 2000 km south-west of Réunion. A single bird was seen in December at 41°26'S, 75°39'E, south of St. Paul Island.

The area west of 50°E seems not to be part of the normal summer distribution range. Only single records exist from south of Madagascar (Stahl & Bartle 1991) and recently the species has been recorded near sub-Antarctic Marion Island (J.W. Enticott pers. comm.). But to date there are no published records from the areas west of Madagascar and along the eastern coast of the African continent, although the species generally is not very rare: Stahl & Bartle (1991) estimated 9000 to 15 000 individuals in summer in the south-west Indian Ocean and BirdLife International (2000) estimates a total population for the species of 8000 to 10 000 birds.

These are the first records of Barau's Petrel for both South Africa and Mozambique and represent a distinct westward extension of the known distribution area. The few records during the long time I have visited these waters (almost 400 days distributed over the whole year except in May and September) suggest that this species is only a very rare vagrant to the region. If the western range regularly extended farther to the west of 45°E or to the coast of Africa then a larger number of records could be expected, given the dense traffic of research, fisheries and other commercial ships in the region.

#### **GREY PETREL *PROCELLARIA CINEREA***

One bird accompanied the vessel feeding on offal among many other procellariids on 5 November 1972 at 26°31'S, 14°14'E off southern Namibia.

#### **SPECTACLED PETREL *PROCELLARIA CONSPICILLATA***

A single bird was seen among 75 White-chinned Petrels on 11 October 1985 at 15°09'S, 11°37'E, off Namibe Province. This is the first record for the species from Angolan waters (Dean 2000).

#### **WHITE-FACED STORM PETREL *PELAGODROMA MARINA***

On 13 May 1986 I recorded one individual in its typical feeding flight in the north-eastern Cape Basin, noon position 24°06'S, 10°45'E, about 220 nautical miles west of the Namibian coast. Other single White-bellied Storm Petrels were seen much more to the north-west in the Angola Basin, presumably from Tristan da Cunha. In contrast to the almost blackish-headed *Fregetta*-species this species has a conspicuous head pattern and a brownish mantle.

#### **WHITE-BELLIED STORM PETREL *FREGETTA GRALLARIA***

I saw four White-bellied Storm Petrels off Namibia on 6 November 1972 at 27°24'S, 14°28'E and on 19 December 1972 at 26°37'S, 14°19'E. On 2 May 1986 there were three at 16°54'S, 7°43'E; 12 about 300–400 nautical miles off Namibia from 3–17 May 1986 from 19°37'S to 26°10'S and 4°40'E to 10°45'E; one far west of South Africa (18 May 1986 at 30°04'S, 4°17'E); four on the Walvis Ridge (19 May 1986 at 31°33'S, 2°30'E), and nine in the south-east Atlantic (20 May 1986 at 34°00'S, 1°09'E). I saw a single bird on the same day and at the same position where I recorded the White-faced Storm Petrel (13 May 1986 at 24°06'S, 10°45'E, west of Namibia).

Single birds were seen on 8 October 1972 at 8°01'S, 0°41'E; on 9 October 1972 at 12°17'S, 4°03'E; and on 23 September 1988 at 6°22'S, 5°54'E, all off Angola.

The above records are only of birds which definitely had no black line along the under-parts and with upper-parts paler than in Black-bellied Storm Petrel *Fregetta tropica* (cf. Harrison 1985) which were recorded twice on the same day. Normally White-bellied Storm Petrels accompanied the ship for short times, sometimes very close alongside, sometimes at a greater distance, but they never followed the vessels in the manner of Wilson's Storm Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*.

#### **BLACK-BELLIED STORM PETREL *FREGETTA TROPICA***

I made two sightings off the Cape coast of South Africa: on 14 May 1968 of two individuals at 33°55'S, 17°51'E (west of Cape Town) and on 17 October 1988 three birds in strong winds very close to the vessel at position 31°31'S, 29°57'E off the eastern Cape. Far off the African coast there were two birds on 11 May 1986 at 26°10'S, 5°24'E (west of Namibia) and one bird in the south-east Atlantic very far off South Africa on 20 May 1986 at 34°00'S, 1°09'E. Finally, I have one record of a single bird off southern Mozambique on 12 November 1987 at 25°47'S, 34°48'E in outer Delagoa Bay. This appears to be the first record for the country (Clancey 1996).

All these birds had a black line along the belly. Sometimes I saw *Fregetta* birds where I could not perceive the under-parts with certainty, such records are not mentioned in this report.

## RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD *PHAETHON AETHEREUS*

On 29 May 1968 an adult Red-billed Tropicbird passed very closely by the ship at 15°49'S, 10°41'E, due west of Ponta Albina, off southern Angola. All the typical characteristics were visible. Although there are six records offshore from Namibia and South Africa in the south-eastern Atlantic Ocean (Chiggs *et al.* 2001, Underhill & Chiggs in press) this is the first record for Angola (Dean 2000).

## WHITE-TAILED TROPIC BIRD *PHAETHON LEPTURUS*

An adult was seen at sea on 28 April 1986 at 10°57'S, 11°22'E, west of Porto Amboim, Cuanza Sul Province. This is the first record for Angolan waters (Dean 2000).

## GREY PHALAROPE *PHALAROPUS FULICARIUS*

A total of 79 Grey Phalaropes (35 in one flock flying south) was seen on 21 October 1974 at 17°05'E, 11°25'E off southern Angola. A single bird was observed at 15°26'S, 11°30'E on 17 October 1986. These are the first records for Angolan waters (Dean 2000).

## BLACK-HEADED GULL *LARUS RIDIBUNDUS*

On 15 October 1986 I observed a single Black-headed Gull flying and swimming in the Baía de Porto Luanda, Angola, among large numbers of Grey-headed Gulls *Larus cirrocephalus*. The bird was characterized by its conspicuous head markings showing an almost complete breeding plumage of dark chocolate brown with a few light spots. Apparently the same bird (with same head pattern) was sighted at the same locality on 25 November 1986: Black-headed Gulls in breeding plumage are generally rare in November (Glutz von Blotzheim 1992). A second bird, an adult in non-breeding plumage, was seen among Grey-headed Gulls at this locality on 26 November 1986. These are the first records for Angola (Dean 2000).

## LITTLE TERN *STERNA ALBIFRONS*

An adult Little Tern was seen foraging with its typical hovering flight in the Baía de Porto Luanda, Angola, on 9 October 1985. The bird was in breeding plumage, with a yellow, black-tipped bill, black cap with a white forehead, blackish wing tips, and of a similar size to two Damara Terns *Sterna balaenarum* that were also present. This is the first record of the species for Angola (Dean 2000).

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