

White phase Southern Giant Petrels in southern Africa

Both the Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus* and the Northern Giant Petrel *M. halli* occur in the waters off southern Africa (Cooper 1976, Cooper & Dowle 1977, Voisin *et al.* 1977). Among the birds of the southern species there is a white phase which has predominantly white plumage with a few scattered black feathers (Fig. 1). The frequency of this form ranges from 0 to 15 per cent at breeding colonies (Shaughnessy 1971). White phase birds occur in southern Africa (Layard 1867, McLachlan & Liversidge 1978), and sightings have been reported from the vicinity of Dassen Island (33 26S, 18 05E) on 8 October 1952 by Rand & Liversidge (1953) and off South West Africa/Namibia at 23 35S, 13 10E on 7 October 1966 by Lambert (1971). Further records of white phase Southern Giant Petrels in the waters of southern Africa are documented here.

Thirty sightings and four museum records of white phase birds are listed in Table 1. They were located between Durban (29 53S, 31 06E) on the east coast and 340 km northwest of Cape Town on the west coast. In addition, Dr P.B. Best occasionally sighted white phase Southern Giant Petrels at the Donkergat whaling station, Saldanha Bay (33 05S, 18 00E) during winter months between 1958 and 1963. Up to 50 birds frequented the bay with a maximum of two of the white phase. Furthermore, there are two unlabelled specimens of white phase birds in the South African Museum.

Twenty-three of the records in Table 1 occurred on the east coast, five occurred on the south coast (between Bird Island, Algoa Bay, and Cape Point) and six occurred on the west coast. The records cannot be used to make direct comparisons of the incidence of white phase Southern Giant Petrels on the coasts of southern Africa as no indication of the effort put into sea watching or beach collecting is provided, and concomitant data on the occurrence of dark phase birds are unavailable. However, the records tend to indicate that white phase giant petrels occur more commonly on the east coast than on the west coast, which implies that Southern Giant Petrels are more common on the east coast than on the west coast of southern Africa. This is consistent with the conclusion of Shaughnessy & Voisin (in prep.) that almost all the giant petrels that congregate in Wolf Bay (24 49S, 15 07E) on the coast of South West Africa/Namibia are Northern Giant Petrels.

That white phase Southern Giant Petrels occur more commonly on the east coast of southern Africa than the west coast is contrary to the remark by Layard (1867, p.360) that "A white variety is common up the West Coast towards Walwich Bay". Thus the frequency of the white phase on the west coast must have decreased since Layard's time or he was exaggerating their occurrence.

The many sightings of white phase Southern Giant Petrels in the vicinity of Durban between 1972 and 1974 by one of us (JCS) indicate that they should not be considered uncommon, as McLachlan & Liversidge (1978) designated them.

Table 1

Localities where white phase Southern Giant Petrels have been recorded in the waters of southern Africa

Locality		Date	Remarks
Durban	29 53S, 31 06E	7 Jul 72	1 sighted
Durban		16 Aug 72	1 sighted
Durban		22 Aug 72	2 sighted
Durban		26 May 73	1 sighted
Durban		27 May 73	2 sighted
Durban		31 May 73	1 sighted
Durban		2 Jun 73	1 sighted
Durban		9 Jun 73	2 sighted
Durban		13 Jun 73	1 sighted
Durban		26 Jun 73	2 sighted
Durban		11 Aug 73	1 sighted
Durban		10 Sep 73	1 sighted
Durban		23 Apr 74	1 sighted
Durban		16 Jun 74	1 sighted
Durban		29 Jun 74	2 sighted
Durban		28 May 76	1 sighted
Port St Johns	31 38S, 29 33E	8 Apr 73	1 sighted
Haga Haga	32 45S, 28 15E	1 Jun 65	*EL 11358 female ringed as pullus 10 Mar 65 at Signy Is, S.Orkneys 60 43S, 45 36W
Bird Island	33 51S, 26 17E	Nov 36	*EL 100
Jeffreys Bay	34 05S, 24 55E	5 Jun 69	*EL 13964 ringed as pullus 15 Mar 69 at Signy Is, S.Orkneys
Cape St Francis	34 13S, 24 50E	4 Aug 74	1 sighted
Witelsbos	34 00S, 24 07E	14 Aug 61	*EL 11358
30 km E Cape Agulhas	34 47S, 20 18E	15 Jun 77	1 sighted from R.S. <i>Africana II</i>
Dassen Is	33 26S, 18 05E	16 May 72	2 sighted
150 km W Cape Town	33 55S, 16 50E	14 Aug 77	1 sighted from trawler
170 km WNW Cape Town	33 27S, 16 44E	20 Aug 65	1 recorded among 3 giant petrels in SFB bird logs
330 km NW CT	31 43S, 16 05E	30 Jul 78	1 sighted from trawler
340 km NW CT	31 38S, 16 06E	26 Jul 78	1 sighted from trawler

* Specimen at East London Museum



Figure 1

White phase Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*
(bottom left) among a group of birds scavenging
from a trawler, July 1978

Photographed by G.H. Nicholls

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