

the public reporting Blue Duck sightings, and financial assistance from the Lottery Grants Board for field surveys, is gratefully acknowledged. Comments by Murray Williams and Clare Veltman assisted in the preparation of this paper.

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A vagrant Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) from Pitcairn Island: A new record for southern and eastern Polynesia

During mid-March 1992, I discovered the remains of a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) at Down Rope Beach, Pitcairn Island. It appeared to have been dead for approximately one month. The distance from Pitcairn Island to the wintering grounds of this North American gull is over 5,000 km (Figure 1) and the nearest vagrancy record to Pitcairn Island is Samoa (4,000 km away). It was probably displaced to the south west by the cyclone strength winds associated with the 1991/92 El Niño. This gull's skeleton (which I used for species identification) is now deposited at the Museum of New Zealand, Wellington (#24650).

Laughing Gulls commonly occur long distances from their breeding and wintering grounds and have been recorded almost annually in Europe, Hawaii and the Line Islands (Harrison 1983, King 1967) and have also been recorded in the west Pacific at:

- Upolu Island, Western Samoa, January and February 1980, 1 imm. (Muse *et al.* 1980).
- Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands, May 1986, 1 ad. (Garrett 1987).
- Cairns, Queensland, December 1987, 1 ad. and 1 imm. (Fisher & Fisher 1988).
- Eastern Australia, 1988, 1989, 1990 etc. occasional records.

This medium-sized gull is a likely vagrant to other south Pacific Islands, including New Zealand and can be identified by a combination of: dark grey upper wings and back; entirely black outer primaries; longated silhouette while in flight; white crescents above and below eye; conspicuous black head in breeding plumage; long drooping dark bill with an orange tip and long wings extending well beyond its tail feathers while at rest.

This record of a vagrant gull reinforces recent fossil bird research on Henderson Island, Pitcairn Group (Wragg, in press), where vagrants make up approximately 20% of the fossil bird list, but only account for 0.04%

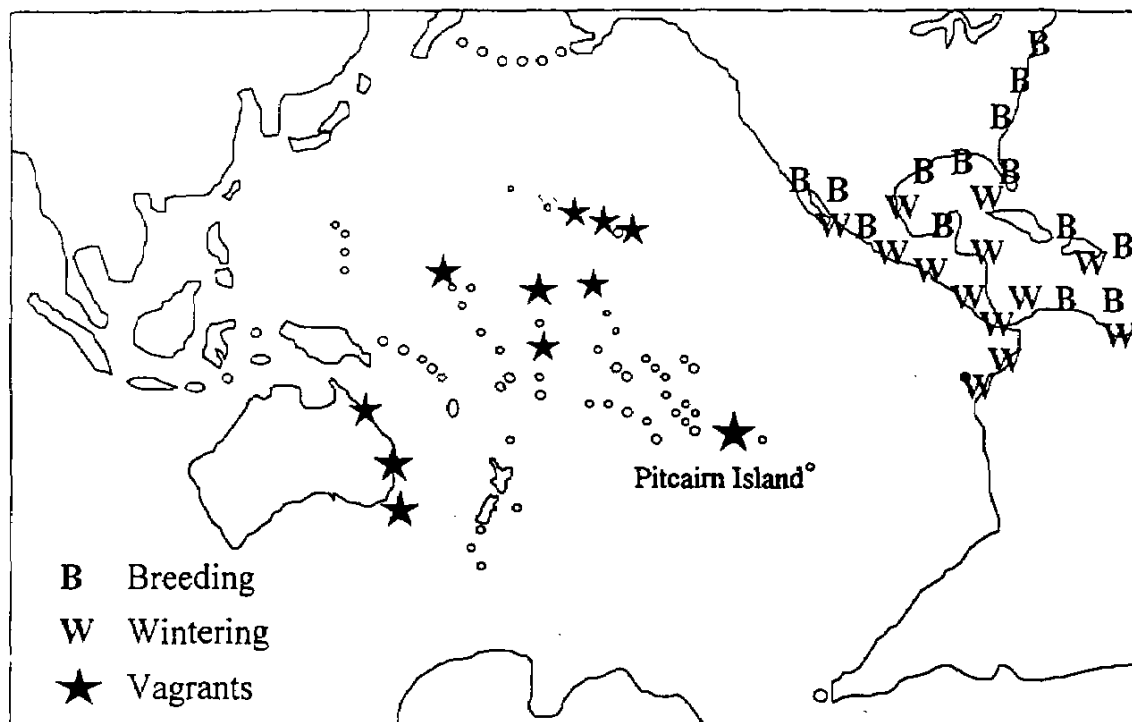


FIGURE 1 – Breeding and wintering locations of the Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla* and the recovery locations of vagrant individuals in the Pacific Ocean.

of the identified bone. It is therefore suggested that biogeographic studies, uncritically based on bird lists, risk overestimating the number of indigenous bird species.

I am grateful to Richard Bradbury and Professor Chris Perrins for their comments on this note.

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