

Petrels off Ninety Mile Beach

A large flock of Thin-billed Prions (*Pachyptila belcheri*), which included five other seabird species, was seen unusually close inshore along Ninety Mile Beach on 31 May 1986. At 1200 hours NZST I and five others were travelling down the beach after completing the monthly beach patrol. Opposite Motupia Island AH pointed out a large number of prions flying north above the incoming breakers. Several prions flew over the beach itself. The weather was squally, with strong south-west winds.

At the Bluff PM and I spent 30 minutes watching the seabirds travelling north. They were present from Hukaterere to Motupia Island, a distance of 41 km, in a band about 400 metres wide. I estimated that 50 000 to 70 000 prions were along the coast. By 1400 hours, the number of birds passing Hukaterere had decreased markedly, indicating the tail end of the flock.

The great majority of birds were Thin-billed Prions, identified by the tiny amount of black on the tail and the distinctive white facial pattern (confirmed by PH, pers. comm.). Their fresh plumage, a clear grey upper surface with a thinly defined 'M' wing marking, would indicate that these were "probably birds of the year which left their South Indian Ocean nest-sites in mid February or early March" (PH, pers. comm.).

A Broad-billed Prion (*P.vittata*) and several Fairy Prions (*P. turtur*) were also seen. Some Blue Petrels (*Halobaena caerulea*) with conspicuous white tail tips were noted at the Bluff, and at Hukaterere (CW per AH).

At least 4000 Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) were estimated to be present on migration. They were seen singly at intervals of 50-100 metres, keeping about 100 metres offshore.

One mollymawk (*Diomedea* sp.) was seen among the prions (PM, pers. comm.).

Three weeks later, on the 21 June beach patrol, two Grey-headed Mollymawks (*D. chrysostoma*), one Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (*Phoebastria palpebrata*), one dying Mottled Petrel (*Pterodroma inexpectata*), eight Short-tailed Shearwaters, four Sooty Shearwaters (*Puffinus griseus*), and four unidentified prions were found among 51 beach-washed birds (LH, pers. comm.).

This beach patrol confirmed the presence of Short-tailed Shearwaters but gave no indication of the great numbers of prions along the beach on 31 May.

I thank David Crockett, Alison and Laurie Howell, Pat Miller and Chris Wetzel for their comments and contributions. I am grateful to Peter Harper for his help.

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