

A PRION PICTURE PUZZLE FROM THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

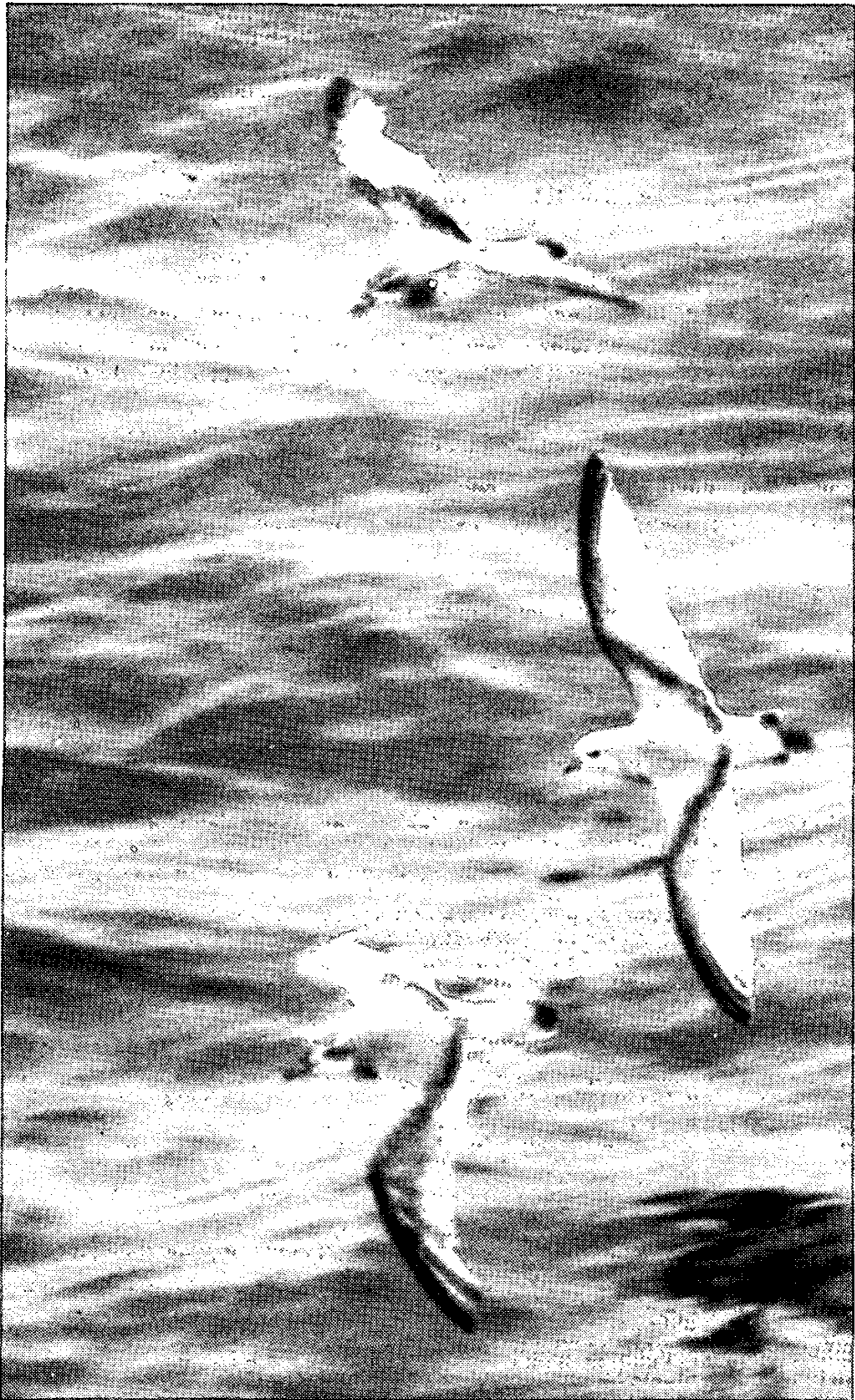


FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

During January and February 1982, while acting as an International Whaling Commission observer aboard the Russian research vessel *Vdumchiviy No 34*, Richard Rowlett took many photographs of seabirds. Four of his prion photographs are reproduced here from 35-mm colour slides.

Figure 1: Near the Antarctic Convergence north-east of Bouvetoya Island, 8 February 1982; three prions in flight. The upper and lower birds are Antarctic Prions (*Pachyptila desolata*) in worn plumage and wing moult. Note the large bill and the dark head and neck collar; also the central semicircle of dark feathers at the tail tip (cf. Fig. 3).

The middle bird is interesting. Note the short small bill and pale plumage, particularly the much paler head and neck region than on the *desolata*. The tail is moulting. The blurred central feathers are old rectrices; the adjacent dark spots are new rectrices yet to grow beyond the white tips of the undertail coverts visible in the photograph.



FIGURE 3

Figure 2: The same mystery bird. Note the position of the feet well forward of the central rectrices. Note also the exposed white undertail coverts and the pale fringing of the secondaries, the greater secondary coverts, and the inner primary feathers. The plumage is typical of immature birds.

Figure 3: An Antarctic Prion, near the Antarctic Convergence north-east of Bouvetoya Island, 8 February 1982. This is a classic example of a worn-plumaged adult bird in wing moult. The tail feathers are new. Such birds are abundant in the Scotia Sea region in February (Harper 1972).



FIGURE 4

Figure 4: A non-breeding Antarctic Prion, Weddell Sea, mid-January 1982. Note the fresh plumage, the dark head with smoky white superciliary, and the bill (cf. the slightly larger more heavily built Salvin's Prion (*P. salvini*) shown in Fig. 8 of Harper, 1980).

Discussion

So, what is the mystery bird?

A glance could easily have resulted in the Thin-billed Prion (*P. belcheri*) being entered in the logbook. It is common in the region, where it nests at the Falkland Islands (Strange 1980) and at the Crozets and Kerguelen (see Harper 1980).

However, the bill and facial pattern are clearly those of either the Fairy Prion (*P. turtur*) or the Fulmar Prion (*P. crassirostris*).

Close examination of the photographs rules out males of *crassirostris* because the bill is too small. This leaves three possible candidates: a female of *crassirostris* (which is sexually dimorphic, females having smaller bills than males); the small subantarctic race of Fulmar Prion (at present known as *P. crassirostris eatoni* but the type specimen has been incorrectly identified: Harper, in prep.); and the Subantarctic Fairy Prion (*P. turtur subantarctica*). The very pale plumage of the photographed bird precludes the likelihood that it is a Fairy Prion (*P. turtur turtur*). In our opinion, the bird is a non-breeding Subantarctic Fairy Prion completing its first moult. It can be compared with the adult bird photographed off the Antipodes Islands illustrated in Harper (1980: Fig. 14).

LITERATURE CITED

- HARPER, P. C. 1972. The field identification and distribution of the Thin-billed Prion (*Pachyptila belcheri*) and the Antarctic Prion (*Pachyptila desolata*). *Notornis* 19 (2): 140-175.
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