SEABIRDS OBSERVED BETWEEN SYDNEY AND BUENOS AIRES

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ABSTRACT

Records were kept of seabirds seen during 30 watches, totalling about 45 hours, on a voyage from Sydney to Buenos Aires via New Zealand and the Straits of Magellan. Results are presented in the form of an annotated species list.

Passage movements of *Puffinus griseus* and *Pterodroma lessonii* were observed, and records of *Pterodroma axillaris, P. inexpectata, Puffinus bulleri* and *P. puffinus* appear to be of distributional significance. A probable sight record of *Pterodroma magentae* is discussed in detail.

INTRODUCTION

From 25 November to 26 December 1970 I kept a daily record of the seabirds observed from the MV *Achille Lauro* as it voyaged from Sydney (Australia) to Southampton (England) via New Zealand and the Straits of Magellan. Because most trans-Pacific sea traffic to and from Australasia follows the more conventional routes to Panama and North America, seabird information for this southern passage is scarce. Records were kept for transects between New Zealand and the Straits of Magellan by W. R. Colbeck (SV *Discovery*) and A. M. Lysaght (SS *Sydney Star*) in 1931 and 1936 respectively but were unpublished (Sir Robert Falla, pers. comm.). More recently, information was collected both north and south of the Antarctic convergence during the research cruises of the USNS *Eltanin* (Szijj 1967, Watson *et al.* 1971, Harper unpubl.) and in Chilean waters by Lathbury (1972), Jehl (1973) and Brown *et al.* (1975). This paper adds the observations made during the section of the voyage between Sydney and Buenos Aires, that is, in the southern oceans south of approximately latitude 35°S. Details of the whole voyage were lodged with the Royal Naval Bird Watching Society and have been summarised by Bourne & Dixon (1975).

METHODS

I made most observations during periods of continuous watching using 10 x 50 binoculars from a lower deck on the side of the ship affording the best light conditions. I did little serious recording from the stern because excessive vibration nullified any advantage of the wider field of view. Individual watches averaged about one hour, daily totals averaged 2¼ hours. Apart from two days of icy winds and fog, weather conditions were generally good and seas slight.

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TABLE 1 — Date, mean position and duration of sea watches.

WATCH NUMBER	DATE	MEAN POSITION	DURATION (HOURS)	REMARKS
1	25 Nov	50 km E of Sydney	1.5	
2	25 Nov	34°48'S 154°02'E	1.0	
3	26 Nov	36°54'S 160°51'E	1.0	
4	26 Nov	37°40'S 163°28'E	1.25	
5	27 Nov	39°49'S 171°22'E	1.0	
6	27 Nov	40°08'S 172°35'E	1.0	
7	27 Nov	40°26'S 173°25'E	0.5	
8	27 Nov	Off Stephens Is.	1.0	Western Cook Strait
9	28 Nov	Leaving Wellington	1.0	Eastern Cook Strait
10	28 Nov	41°47'S 175°23'E	3.0	
11	28 Nov	42°48'S 177°50'E	0.5	
12	28 Nov(R)	45°07'S 176°30'W	1.6	*Day Repeated*
13	28 Nov(R)	45°46'S 174°33'W	1.0	" "
14	28 Nov(R)	46°04'S 172°51'W	1.0	" "
15	29 Nov	47°44'S 163°08'W	1.0	
16	29 Nov	47°54'S 161°40'W	1.0	
17	30 Nov	48°54'S 151°08'W	1.0	
18	1 Dec	48°54'S 139°27'W	1.0	
19	2 Dec	49°02'S 127°49'W	1.0	
20	3 Dec	49°40'S 116°00'W	1.0	*Fog 3 & 4 Dec.*
21	5 Dec	51°18'S 93°48'W	1.0	
22	5 Dec	51°30'S 90°40'W	1.0	
23	6 Dec	52°06'S 80°08'W	2.25	
24	6 Dec	52°15'S 77°20'W	1.0	
25	7 Dec	80 km W of Punta Arenas	3.0	Straits of Magellan
26	7 Dec	25 km E of Punta Arenas	2.0	" " "
27	8 Dec	48°47'S 65°04'W	2.0	Atlantic Ocean
28	8 Dec	47°29'S 63°59'W	1.0	" "
29	9 Dec	41°37'S 59°07'W	1.0	" "
30	9 Dec	40°37'S 58°18'W	1.0	" "

I was familiar with many of the species seen from experience gained during two years of offshore trips in Sydney coastal waters. However, several new species were encountered and Alexander (1963) and King (1967) were used for identification. Many birds cannot be specifically identified from a large fast-moving ship and in general these have been omitted from the results. Where such a record is included the uncertain identification is made clear.

RESULTS

About 45 hours of observations were made during 30 watches at sea, while ashore at Punta Arenas and while in the estuary of the Rio de la Plata. Details of the sea watches are listed in Table 1, the mean positions having been calculated from the noon position of the vessel and its speed. It was unfortunate that our approach to the Chilean coast and entry into the Straits of Magellan occurred during darkness.

Distribution of the more numerous pelagic species is summarised in Table 2 and discussed in more detail in the following annotated species list.

MAGELLAN PENGUIN *Spheniscus magellanicus*

Only three small parties were seen; possibly an indication of the difficulty of observing penguins from a large ship.

WANDERING ALBATROSS *Diomedea exulans*

Although only small numbers were seen this was the most widely distributed species and the only one recorded in more than half of the watches.

BLACK-BROWED MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea melanophrys*

Seen in only very small numbers in the Pacific but common in the Straits of Magellan and abundant in the Atlantic on 8 December. Typical of that day was a single sweep of the horizon during watch 28 when 102 were counted. As these are summer records this distribution probably reflects the relative distances to the nearest breeding colonies. Bartle (1974) has shown *melanophrys* to be rare in the Cook Strait region in summer.

GREY-HEADED MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea chrysostoma*

Johnson (1965) stated that in Chilean waters *D. chrysostoma* is normally outnumbered by *D. melanophrys* by a ratio of 10:1. On 6 December when approximately 300 km from the Chilean coast, I recorded up to 40 *chrysostoma* without a definite record of *melanophrys*. Unfortunately no inshore observations could be made because our approach to the Straits of Magellan occurred during darkness.

WHITE-CAPPED MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea cauta cauta*

Only 6 birds seen, all in the Cook Strait region.

TABLE 2 — Distribution of more numerous pelagic species.

SPECIES	WATCH NUMBER																												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Spheniscus magellanicus																									6	4	7			
Diomedea exulans	2	1		1	2			1		2	2			1	2		1		1			3	1	8			1	2		
melanophrys				2									1						1				(1)		200+	10	500+	500+	4	4
chrysostoma																							30+	2						
c. cauta							1	4		1																				
c. salvini												3+	2	1																
Macronectes spp.							1	3	12		5	5	1												6		1	3	1	
Daption capense									6					1																
Pterodroma macroptera	40+	20+	15+	10+						70+	5+			1															(1)	
lessonii													5	4	2	1	2	4	7	1			1							
incerta																													35+	8
inexpectata			(2)										1		1	1	1		1											
nigripennis		(1)	10+	2																										
Pachyptila spp.					4	1				40+		8+	4	3	25	15	7	1	1				30+				50+	30+		
Procellaria cinerea																							20+							
aequinoctalis																							10+	1			20+	50+	3	
Puffinus bulleri					6	40+				3	6+																			
gravis																												1	30+	5
griseus	1											35+	40+	40+	40+						1+		2							
Pelagodroma marina										1		200+	30+																	
Stercorarius skua						1								1	1										150+	4			1	
spp.		1																									1		30+	15+

Note Numbers in brackets indicate probable rather than certain identification.

SALVIN'S MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea cauta salvini*
Seen only east of New Zealand.

GIANT PETREL *Macronectes* spp.
All birds seen were dark plumaged and no attempt was made to distinguish the northern and southern species.

CAPE PIGEON *Daption capense*
Not recorded in the South American sector, which agrees with Jehl (1973), whose results indicated that the nominate race does not move north into Chilean waters until the austral autumn.

GREY-FACED PETREL *Pterodroma macroptera*
Common in the western Tasman Sea with the highest count recorded on watch 1 between 30 and 70 km off the coast of New South Wales. Present in decreasing numbers eastwards on watches 2, 3 and 4 but not seen on 27 November in the outer approaches to Cook Strait.

WHITE-HEADED PETREL *Pterodroma lessonii*
Seen consistently over a wide range of longitude from 174°W to 80°W, a distribution matched only by *Pachyptila* spp. All the *lessonii* seen on 28 (repeated) and 29 November were clearly moving in the same S-SW direction as the Sooty Shearwaters *(Puffinus griseus)* (see below); those seen further east had no consistent flight direction.

ATLANTIC PETREL *Pterodroma incerta*
Common on 9 December in association with *Puffinus gravis* and *Stercorarius* spp. A few of the birds had noticeably fresh brown plumage in comparison with the majority which looked faded.

MOTTLED PETREL *Pterodroma inexpectata*
The records between 163°W and 128°W apparently extend considerably the range of this species as defined by Watson *et al.* (1971). The two birds seen on watch 3 in the Tasman Sea were almost certainly *inexpectata,* having dark leading edges to the underwings and a dusky area on the belly, but they were seen too briefly for confirmation.

MAGENTA PETREL *Pterodroma magentae*
On 28 November (repeated) at 46°04'S 172°51'W, about 400 km SE of the Chatham Islands, I recorded a *Pterodroma* with the following description. " Similar in size and colour of upperparts to *inexpectata* but with dusky underwing, apart from a very faint paler narrow central stripe. Head, neck and throat, possibly also upper breast, darkish grey, uniform with upperparts; remaining underparts white." The bird was seen at a distance of about 250 m; it was flying in roughly the same direction as the ship but was not attracted to it. At the time of observation I considered it to be probably a Soft-plumaged Petrel *(P. mollis)* because of the dark underwings, but recorded it as unidentified because the occurrence was well outside the normal range known at that time. Later, this tentative identification assumed some

credibility when I learned that the range of *mollis* had been extended to the New Zealand region with records at the Antipodes Islands (Warham 1969).

Bourne & Dixon (1975) suggested, however, that the description agreed best with that of the then lost Magenta Petrel. I had not considered this possibility and found it difficult to investigate because of the scarcity of information on *magentae*. Certainly the description of the type of *magentae* given by Bourne (1964) was close to that of the bird I observed, especially the dark upperparts, head and underwing, and the white breast and belly. On the other hand, the size seemed to conflict since *magentae* is stated to have similar dimensions to the large gadfly petrels of the *macroptera-lessonii-incerta-solandri* group whereas the bird I saw appeared only a little larger than *inexpectata*.

The problem would have remained unresolved had this paper not been delayed until after the rediscovery of the Chatham Island Taiko or Magenta Petrel (Crockett, *Notornis* in prep.). Dr Peter Harper (pers. comm.) referring to an earlier draft said that he had questioned the *mollis* record even before seeing the photographs of the rediscovered *P. magentae*. "I believe you saw *magentae* on 28 November, because your description fits the bird quite well."

On this advice, I contacted David Crockett for first-hand information and opinion. He replied "It is highly likely you did see a Magenta Petrel . . . and if you reconsider your opinion in light of the current rediscovery and can reconcile your observations and your mental image with the enclosed photograph, then you would be justified in your identification as *magentae*."

The photograph taken by R. N. Thomas of Auckland shows a Magenta Petrel in the hand with one wing held extended, and the head, underparts and underwing clearly visible. It bears a striking resemblance to my mental picture of the bird I saw, particularly the solid dark head and contrasting white underparts. The undersurface of the primaries and secondaries appears pale grey in this photograph. However, Crockett comments that these areas are "silvery grey and highly reflective depending on the angle relative to the source of light." At the time of observation I noted that the wing was not uniformly dark and this may have been a function of this reflection. I have had similar experience in the field with *P. macroptera*, which has a dark underwing that can appear pale in certain light conditions.

The bird in the photograph appears smaller and more compact than *macroptera* and this is confirmed by Crockett (pers. comm.) who gives the length of *magentae* as about 38 cm; about 3 cm less than *macroptera*. I would have classified the bird I saw as a medium-sized gadfly petrel with dimensions perhaps in the range 34-35 cm. Unfortunately, no other species were present at the time of observation

to allow an accurate size comparison. It was certainly smaller than the many *macroptera* seen on the previous day.

In the Pacific region, only three *Pterodroma* spp., *magentae, alba* and *rostrata* have a dark head similar in colour to the upperparts and also a dark underwing and white underparts. *P. alba* and *rostrata* are very similar in general appearance and can be ruled out of the present observation because of their sooty brown coloration, whereas the bird I saw was sooty grey. Moreover, both are species of tropical and subtropical seas and their occurrence at 46°S in subantarctic waters would be exceptional. In light of the discovery on the Chatham Islands the position would be quite credible for *magentae.*

I have discussed this observation at some length so that readers can make an independent evaluation. I believe the evidence is strong enough for a sight record of the Magenta Petrel, probably the first recorded occurrence away from the Chatham Islands since the original records in 1867.

COOK'S PETREL *Pterodroma cookii*

On watch 4 in the Tasman Sea, I recorded a *Pterodroma* similar in size and general appearance to *P. nigripennis* but with a pale grey crown, and a white underwing apart from a very narrow black line along the leading edge. I considered this bird to be a Cook's Petrel.

BLACK-WINGED PETREL *Pterodroma nigripennis*

Observed only in the Tasman Sea.

CHATHAM ISLAND PETREL *Pterodroma axillaris*

On 28 November (repeated) when about 120 km SE of the Chatham Islands (45°07'S 176°30'W), I observed a single *Pterodroma* closely resembling *nigripennis* in size and plumage. However, as it approached it was clearly seen to have black axillaries and was identified as a Chatham Island Petrel. This appears to be the first record of this species away from its breeding grounds.

PRIONS *Pachyptila* spp.

Widely distributed in the Pacific Ocean and South American offshore waters.

FAIRY PRION *Pachyptila turtur*

During watches 7 and 8 when approaching Stephens Island many thousands of prions were observed. All those seen at close range had broad tail bands and were identified as *P. turtur* in view of the large colony breeding on that island.

GREY PETREL *Procellaria cinerea*

At least 20 were seen in association with *Diomedea chrysostoma* and *Procellaria aequinoctialis* during watch 23 when about 300 km off the Chilean coast. This species was not recorded by either Jehl (1973) or Brown *et al.* (1975). It did not follow the vessel.

WHITE-CHINNED PETREL *Procellaria aequinoctialis*

Fairly common in South American offshore waters: not recorded in the Straits of Magellan.

FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER *Puffinus carneipes*

Surprisingly, only one definite record, a single bird during watch 10.

WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER *Puffinus pacificus*

Two were recorded on the first watch when still just within sight of the coast of New South Wales.

BULLER'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus bulleri*

The observations made on watches 5, 6 and 10 agree with the summer distribution given by Jenkins (1974). The birds seen during watch 11 extend this range by a further 120 km south-eastward.

GREAT SHEARWATER *Puffinus gravis*

Present over a wide range of latitude in the south Atlantic Ocean, also being recorded north of Buenos Aires to approximately 8°S on 17 December.

SOOTY SHEARWATER *Puffinus griseus*

Observations during watches 12-15 and other casual sightings indicate that for about 30 hours on 28 (repeated) and 29 November there was a continuous S-SW passage of this species at a rate of about 40 birds per hour. During this period the ship traversed about 1000 km. If it is assumed that all birds passing within 2 km of the ship were observed and that the passage was continuous during the 20 daylight hours of the period, it can be calculated that up to 200 000 birds could have been involved. From the direction of flight and the southerly position (45-47°S) this passage would appear to comprise subadult birds making a late return to the breeding grounds on the subantarctic islands to the south of New Zealand. This would be consistent with the findings of Richdale (1963) who showed that, in the Foveaux Strait colonies, adults returned in late September but large numbers of non-breeding birds did not appear until the onset of egg-laying in late November. The passage was in a discrete band because no birds were seen on the previous day and there were no further positive sightings until approaching the Chilean coast.

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER *Puffinus tenuirostris*

A party of about 10 was recorded during the first watch when still within sight of the New South Wales coast.

MANX SHEARWATER *Puffinus puffinus*

A single bird was seen at 48°50'S 65°10'W on 8 December, close to the southern limit of this species' distribution.

WHITE-FACED STORM PETREL *Pelagodroma marina*

Present almost continuously in twos and threes during watch 12,

which was centred about 120 km SE of the Chatham Islands. Smaller numbers were seen on watch 13 when about 250 km from the islands but none on watch 14 when about 370 km distant. These figures probably indicate foraging range since it is likely that these birds came from breeding colonies in the Chatham Group.

DIVING PETREL *Pelecanoides* sp.

Diving Petrels were seen only in the Straits of Magellan. They were more numerous east of Punta Arenas, with about 50 seen in small groups during watch 26. In the western Straits about 10 were recorded during watch 25. Although no attempt was made to separate the species, they were probably *P. magellani,* based on the specimen evidence of Humphrey *et al.* (1970).

BIGUA CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax olivaceus*

Occasional birds seen in the Rio de la Plata and in the docks area at Buenos Aires.

KING CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax albiventer*

BLUE-EYED CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax atriceps*

At least two *P. atriceps* were present among a group of about 100 *albiventer* on a disused jetty at Punta Arenas, specific determination being judged by the extent of the white on the cheeks. Cormorants were common in the vicinity of several rocky islands during watch 25 but were too distant for accurate identification. Four *albiventer* were seen during watch 26.

SOUTHERN GREAT SKUA *Stercorarius skua lonnbergi*

Common in the Straits of Magellan east to Punta Arenas. The individual recorded during watch 6 in the western approaches to Cook Strait was seen to pursue a Buller's Shearwater down on to the water and force it to disgorge.

SKUAS *Stercorarius* spp.

The bird seen on watch 27 and several of those present during watches 29 and 30 appeared rather slender, flew with a tern-like flight and were probably *longicaudus.* The remainder were of heavier build and were considered to be *parasiticus.* The bird on watch 2 was a pale phase *parasiticus.*

SOUTHERN BLACK-BACKED GULL *Larus dominicanus*

Common in New Zealand coastal waters, in the Straits of Magellan and along the Rio de la Plata.

RED-BILLED GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*

Common in New Zealand coastal waters.

BROWN-HOODED GULL *Larus maculipennis*

Only a few of a group of about 30 at Punta Arenas had reached full breeding plumage; most had the faint outline of the dark head

just appearing. One bird had a noticeably rosy tinge on the underparts. Fairly common along the Rio de la Plata.

DOLPHIN GULL *Gabianus scoresbii*

The only record was a group of six at Punta Arenas.

SOUTH AMERICAN TERN *Sterna hirundinacea*

Common in the Straits of Magellan especially east of Punta Arenas, with about 400 seen during watch 26. West of Punta Arenas about 50 were recorded on watch 25.

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