

## LETTER

The Editor,  
Sir,

28 April 1980

### CHATHAM ISLAND TAIKO v. SOFT-PLUMAGED PETREL AT SEA

In his paper on "Seabirds observed between Sydney and Buenos Aires," A. E. F. Rogers (*Notornis* 27: 69-78, 1980) discusses at some length a presumed sighting of a Magenta Petrel = Chatham Island Taiko (*Pterodroma magentae*), in square 46°S 172°W on 28 November 1970. At first he considered the bird to be a Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis*, which identification I support. I wish to relate a similar, but converse, experience which draws attention to the considerable similarity between these two petrels.

On 6 December 1978, while returning to Auckland from Antipodes Islands on HMNZS *Waikato*, we spent the afternoon passing at about 22 knots through a sea fog which reduced visibility to about 100 metres. There was little visible birdlife but regular Grey-faced (*P. macroptera*), White-headed (*P. lessonii*) and Mottled (*P. inexpectata*) Petrels. At 1630 hours I went on deck without binoculars to see whether our environment had altered. This had not, but as I looked about a medium-sized *Pterodroma* swept in near the stern, canted and disappeared aft. It was dark above, on the underwings and on the foreneck-upper breast region; the rest of the underparts, including undertail coverts, was white.

We were then in square 46°S 178°E, over the Bounty Trough and heading for the Chatham Rise, a shallow seabed feature between Banks Peninsula and Chatham Islands, which we would cross that night. I had thought that any chance we would have on this voyage of seeing a Taiko would come late this day, and so this sighting was quickly construed as possibly my first view of the quarry. A telegram via Chathams Radio to the 6th Taiko Expedition, then in the Tuku Valley, was already forming in my mind when I returned on deck with binoculars about one hour later in square 45°S 178°E. I soon had a clear sighting of a Soft-plumaged Petrel, followed by another less definite due to the fog. There was now little doubt that my first sighting had also been of *P. mollis*.

In the good sighting with binoculars I was able to see that the dark foreneck was really a band with a whitish throat above it, and I was able to get a better impression of size, there being Mottled Petrels still about for comparison. In fact, these are really the only distinguishing features at sea between *magentae* and *mollis*. Weight comparisons are c.450 g against c.300 g respectively. The Taiko has more uniformly dark upperparts, but seeing this depends on a favourable sighting.

John Jenkins and I then reconsidered tentative sightings of *mollis* on our southward voyage, and we concluded that these now seemed more definite. They included about five birds flushed from the sea with a resting group of Grey-faced Petrels, and all were made in square 46°S 173°E. Thus all our sightings, tentative or confirmed, of *mollis* were made between 45° and 47° S and north-west to north of Antipodes Island. None was seen nearer that island where, at night, we observed much activity in the burgeoning little colony. It would not be surprising if their range at sea extends further east, and this would encompass the position of Rogers' sighting.

Although the subject is clearly debatable, Rogers at first thought he had seen *mollis*, and I believe that is what he saw. The sighting was made about 400 km from Chathams and 800 km from Antipodes. However, I do not think that it is generally realised how very rare *magentae* is. If there are 20 alive now I would be very surprised to learn so. On the other hand, the colony of *mollis* at Antipodes I. must already number several hundreds. There were possibly not significantly less in 1970.

The sighting of an unusual petrel near Chatham Islands by P. E. Roberts (*Notornis* 24: 280-283, 1977) was, however, of a Taiko in my opinion. It was too dark on the foreneck and, by Roberts' account, too large for *mollis*. The lowering sun played tricks with the underwing pattern by causing reflections off the dark plumage. Kermadec Petrel (*P. neglecta*) and Herald Petrel (*P. arminjoniana*) would have been far, far out of their normal range.

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