

SOME THOUGHTS UPON AN EARLY RECORD OF  
WHITE NELLY IN THE TASMAN SEA

Captain Cook and his naturalists on the First Voyage (1768-71) got to know the Giant Petrel or Nelly *Macronectes giganteus* in its darker forms and coined for it the name Mother Carey's Goose. But for several decades after this discovery white Nellys seem to have escaped the notice of the early explorers of the southern oceans. Then in 1838, during his voyage to Australia, John Gould noted "the circumstance of an albino variety having followed the vessel for three weeks while we were running down our longitude between Cape of Good Hope and Van Diemen's Land."

In 1860, when Richard Laishley and his family emigrated, he kept a diary of the voyage from Gravesend to Auckland and such was his interest in natural history that his diary is now a valuable sea-bird log. Of course, like all prudent observers who are seeing the birds of the southern oceans for the first time, he had problems of identification. But there can be no doubt about the identity of the great white bird so vividly described in the following extract.

"1 October 1860. Yesterday we passed Van Diemen's Land, sailing about 90 miles to the south of it. The day was calm and fair; and the numerous sea birds singularly familiar, which last circumstance probably induced some of the young men to fish for these with their lines. As I sat at my cabin window reading, my attention was attracted upon looking up by a bird of unusual size and apparently of the purest white. At first I thought it was a magnificent Albatross, but when it came near to the ship, which on more than one occasion it afterwards did, I could perceive that its size was about that of a fine Mulimuk (perhaps  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the size of the Gt. Albatross, or rather less); that it was neither in wing, neck, head nor beak quite of the same lengthened proportion as the Albatross and above all that the underparts of the body and wings and some parts of the upper surface of the bird (I am not clear how much) were distinctly marked with small dark spots, probably dark grey or black, looking a little, as Charley expressed it, like a plum-pudding dog i.e. a spotted coach-dog; but the spots on the bird were not large and only distinguishable when it came nearest the vessel. I have never seen the bird represented or read of it and our observant captain is as greatly at a loss respecting it as myself. He had never seen a bird of the kind before. This bird mingled and settled with the other sea birds in our neighbourhood. The grey and brown shearwater, Cape Pigeon, Storm Petrel, Mulimuk, Black Albatross and Great Albatross were all about us in greater or less numbers."

It would appear that before Laishley, the only naturalist who observed and commented upon a white Nelly was Gould. Since the history of the discovery and evaluation of the white form is rather elusive, I have gathered together such early records as I can find. Coues (1866) remarked upon the variation in colour and recorded the

possession of a pure white specimen, which he concluded "is the first note of such a variety." Are the date and provenance of this specimen known? Potts (1873) obtained the first specimen in New Zealand and, believing he had a new species, named it *Ossiifraga alba*. It had been feeding on refuse among common Nellys off Centre Island, Foveaux Strait, on 3 January 1873. Its white plumage was "mottled very sparingly throughout with single brownish grey feathers." Shortly afterwards on 15 January he saw another in Cook Strait. "It had been blowing a furious gale on the day before."

Edward Wilson became familiar with the white phase at Macquarie Island in November 1901 and sketched one standing on snow with wings raised. Later he did a fine portrait of the head of a white male taken at Cape Adare. In view of more recent findings, his observation that all the nellys seen at the Auckland Islands in March 1904 were of the darker variety is significant.

By the time Buller published his Supplement in 1905, he was able to record specimens or sightings from Kaikoura, Milford Sound, The Snares and the Bounty Islands. He also added two very relevant comments: (a) "The late Captain Fairchild assured me he had more than once observed several white ones in the air together," and (b) "Mr. Jennings informed me that on his last visit to Macquarie Island he observed more white Nellys than dark ones. They were breeding at that time and he specially noticed that the young of the white Nellys were likewise white."

As recently as 1910 Godman could still write that the Giant Petrel has "occasionally but very rarely a pure white phase of plumage." A propos of which assertion, is the feathering ever pure white without the random scattering of a few small dark spots? Mathews (1912), discussing the scarcity of specimens, has a plate by the famous bird-artist, J. G. Keulemans, with the comment "The bird figured and described is a male albino collected on the Snares."

It was left to Falla (1937) to confirm Jennings's report and to show that it was not necessary to go all the way to Antarctica to find white Nellys in some abundance. At Macquarie Island he noted a high percentage of white birds. "In one party of two hundred birds, twenty white ones were seen." Falla's text is accompanied by a photograph of a white Nelly incubating. From studies subsequently made by Warham (1962), we now know that there is a high frequency of white-phase birds in the breeding colonies on Macquarie, nearly 7% on the west side of the island and more than 15% on the east.

Nevertheless, despite the comparative proximity of Macquarie Island and an increase in sea-going observers, few white examples are reported among the hundreds of plain Nellys which annually visit our coastal waters. Half a century's beachcombing in northern New Zealand yielded only four white specimens (Sibson 1969), and it is

noteworthy that when another white Nelly came ashore alive in the Hauraki Gulf (McKenzie 1971), the band on its leg proved that it had come from the far distant South Orkneys.

Another white Nelly, also banded in the South Orkneys, came to hand off our northern coast in mid-December 1978. It was captured and nursed before release by Mr D. Allen, a fisherman of Whangamata (Taylor 1979). At first it was thought to be a Snow Goose! Shades and echoes of the name bestowed by Captain Cook and his fellow sailors! Indeed, banding recoveries seem to show that many, if not most, of the Nellies which reach northern New Zealand are young birds of the southern type. Where then do the numerous white Nellies of Macquarie Island go outside the breeding season?

A few white Nellies may be expected around New Zealand every year. They appear mainly between mid-winter and early summer. Laishley's date was typical. Evidently there are years of exceptional abundance. Cheshire (1977) has shown that 1976 was such a year, a veritable *annus mirabilis*. On 1 October — by a curious coincidence the same date as Laishley's sighting — he had the unique distinction of seeing three together off Whangarei Heads. They were present for a whole day feeding off galley scraps and could be "attracted to the ship's side with slices of bread." Nellies are Nellies anywhere, whether brown or white, northern or southern.

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