

SHORT NOTES

MASKED (BLUE-FACED) BOOBIES IN THE FIRTH OF THAMES

On 30 October 1977, in the Firth of Thames, when the summer census had been completed, attention shifted seawards when D. A. Lawrie and P. M. Wilkinson were joined by B. J. Burch, G. L. Yockney and B. Brown and later by M. E. McKenzie and H. R. McKenzie, to watch two strangers among a flock of feeding Australasian Gannets (*Sula serrator*). Whereas the gannets flew and dived in typical fashion, another bird of similar size but of darker appearance soared, wheeled, and occasionally flew with a flapping flight. It was seen to dive only once, after an almost horizontal approach, and its body did not penetrate the water. During our half-hour watch the bird approached closely enough once for its principal details to be noted. It was tentatively identified as a Masked (Blue-faced) Booby (*Sula dactylatra*).

Size: approximately that of *S. serrator*.

Head and body: all white except for dusky facial mask; back (between the wings) dark, sprinkled white.

Tail: dark above and below.

Wings: upper — dark, sprinkled white, with a large white area showing strongly on the scapulars; under — white, with dark-bordered trailing edges and tips, and a finer, perhaps broken, black line on leading edge.

Bill: horn colour.

HRMcK, DAL and BB, using telescopes of x 30 and x 15-60, agreed that the facial mask did not extend far enough behind the eyes for the bird to be a Brown Booby (*S. leucogaster*), which in any case has brown head and neck; and that it could not be a Red-footed Booby (*S. sula*), which is slimmer, smaller and has a long, all-white tail. BJB and BB also watched a second bird whose behaviour and appearance were similar except that it seemed generally whiter. It was seen more distantly and briefly than the other but it was probably in adult or nearly adult plumage.

Falla, Sibson & Turbott (1966, *Field guide to the birds of New Zealand*) describe *S. dactylatra* as "largely white and at first glance rather like *S. serrator*; but the tail and flight feathers are dark brown, appearing in flight as a broad black band on the rear edge of the wing. Head white; beak stout and yellow; naked skin on face and throat blue-black, feet greenish-blue. Immatures are mainly white, but head, throat, mantle, upper wing surfaces and tail are brown. . . . The subspecies *personata* is widespread in the western and central Pacific; only recorded in New Zealand from the Kermadecs where it breeds."

The *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand* (1970) states "Stragglings south to northern New Zealand; Gannet Island, 1883 (Reischek) and west of North Cape, 1964."

The birds were probably sub-adults beyond the brown-headed stage but retaining some brown on the wings and on the back between the wings.

Two birds were seen distantly at Miranda on 19 October 1977 by Maxine E. McKenzie, Joan Trollope and H. R. McKenzie. The further one appeared to be all dark but MEMcK had a good view of the nearer one and noted the under surface to be white and the ends of the wings to be black. As the shape was definitely that of a gannet, it could not have been *S. sula*. Both birds were soaring and flying in circles, quite unlike a gannet, and were not diving. They were over shallow water near mangroves, where Australasian Gannets have not been noted.

On 5 March 1978, in weather similar to that of the census day, with a south-westerly wind, good light and a falling tide, two birds were seen from the Miranda lime-works to as close as 300 m. When first seen they were moving together southward along the coast. The only birds feeding nearby were several White-fronted Terns (*Sterna striata*) and a Little Tern (*S. albifrons*), close to the shore. After fifteen minutes one booby returned but the other was apparently further out. As previously, it was soaring and wheeling, not unlike an albatross, with only occasional wing-flapping. It dived several times into relatively shallow water from a height of 4-5 m at an angle of about 45 degrees.

DAL described the plumage as:

Head and body: white except for facial mask which was not as noticeable as previously. Top of wings, including back between the wings: dark, although darker toward the wing tips, and broken dark patches on front of wing. Most noticeable, however, was a white patch on leading edge of wing between body and first joint, particularly obvious when seen from front on. Tail: dark upper and lower, with pointed shape. General impression was that plumage was tidier and more defined than previously, suggesting transition from juvenile to adult plumage.

J. A. F. Jenkins (pers. comm.) has seen Blue-faced Boobies fairly regularly on voyages between New Zealand and Fiji and Tonga, but always far to the north, usually at about 23°S, more than 660 miles north of North Cape.

Blue-faced Boobies in New Zealand coastal waters are most likely to be from Norfolk Island or the Kermadec Islands, where they breed in considerable numbers.

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