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tahiti petrel

First confirmed record for Africa

On 11 November 2018 a small group of us were on a pelagic day-trip off Durban about 33 kilometres offshore (at 30.040 S; 31.346 E). Our boat was bobbing around at a chum slick we had established, which was attracting varying numbers of Shy and Indian Yellow-nosed albatrosses, White-chinned and Great-winged petrels, Sooty Shearwater, European and Wilson's storm petrels, and Swift and Common terns. We were particularly on the lookout for Barau's Petrel, which is best found off Durban in October/November.

Niall Perrins suddenly spotted a procellariiform seabird with white underparts about 200 metres out, racing towards us. Within seconds of his call, the rest of us were onto the bird. The initial thought of Barau's went out of the window as the bird revealed all-dark upperparts, head, upper chest and underwings. Our next thought was Atlantic Petrel, which would be extraordinary off Durban, at least this far inshore. But that species has a dark undertail, among other differences, and was quickly discarded. That seemed to leave us with only Trindade Petrel among the list of tubenose seabirds thus far confirmed from southern African waters. Trindade has only been recorded once in southern Africa: a bird photographed off Port Elizabeth in January 2014 that showed features suggestive of a hybrid between Trindade and Herald petrels. But those two species typically show some white on the face, throat and underwings, unlike our bird. They also lack the most singular feature that we noted as our bird cruised past: a disproportionately long, deep and heavy beak.

The bird twisted and turned a few times as it passed through our chum slick before disappearing. It was visible for less than two minutes, but the light was excellent, it came as close as about 100 metres and we were able to get good photographs of it. Examining a comprehensive field guide that we had on board, it immediately became clear that it could be only one of two options: Tahiti Petrel or Beck's Petrel. The former breeds quite widely across the tropical south Pacific. In the non-breeding period (November to February) it is known to wander even more broadly, including eastwards to the Americas and westwards into the Indian Ocean around Australia and Indonesia. It has a total population size estimated at some 20 000 to 30 000 individuals. By contrast, Beck's is restricted to a tiny area off the east coast of Papua New Guinea and the total population size is estimated at between 50 and 249 individuals (although it could be larger). Indeed, it was thought to have possibly gone extinct until it was rediscovered in this area in 2003 by seabird expert Hadoram Shirihai. Beck's is essentially identical to Tahiti in plumage features and has in the past been considered a subspecies of the latter. It is, however, about 25 per cent smaller than Tahiti, with a body length of about 29 centimetres as against 39 centimetres in Tahiti. The beak is also proportionally not as massive, particularly in length.

As confirmed by our images, the bird we saw was characterised by an inordinately large beak that is indicative of Tahiti rather than Beck's. Perhaps even more telling, we judged the bird to be closer in size to Barau's and Great-winged petrels (38–40 centimetres), species we have extensive experience with off Durban, and hence in the size range of Tahiti, rather than other local species we know well that are closer in size to Beck's, such as Soft-plumaged Petrel, Tropical Shearwater and even Antarctic Prion (27–34 centimetres). We are therefore confident that the bird we saw was a Tahiti Petrel *Pseudobulweria rostrata*.

This tale has a twist to it. More than 30 years ago, from 7 to 17 November 1987, a German fisheries researcher with a passion for seabirds, Kurt Lambert, was present on a trawler off the coast of southern Mozambique. He had three sightings of single birds that he was convinced answered the description of Tahiti Petrel – this was at exactly the same time of year as our observation off Durban. From 12 to 14 December 1990 he had two more sightings of similar birds, in one case of two birds together. All of these sightings were 45 to 110 kilometres offshore, slightly north-east of Maputo. Although Lambert published these observations, he conceded that they required confirmation through photographic or specimen evidence and these records have not hitherto been formally accepted by the ornithological community. We believe our photographs provide such belated confirmation and a likely vindication of Lambert's long-disparaged records.

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