

Field trip to Grey-faced Petrel colony, Rapanui, Tongaporutu, Taranaki, 28 September 2010

The possibility of a field trip to Tongaporutu, to see the Rapanui Grey-faced Petrel colony there, was raised in early September. Other than Paul Gibson (and Robyn and Colin Ogle, who had a prior commitment on the date in question), no one else indicated much interest in going on the trip, scheduled then for 18-19 September. As it was, the weather intervened and the trip was postponed to the following weekend (25-26 September), with Paul then not available but Duncan Watson (Wellington) indicating a willingness to travel up and accompany us. Once more, the weather put a damper on our plans.

On Tuesday, 28 September, with the prospect of a brief break in the weather, Sue Frost and I travelled up to Tongaporutu, where we met Barry Hartley (OSNZ Regional Representative for Taranaki, and one of the Rapanui Grey-faced Petrel Trust trustees) and Peter Fryer, another trustee, who kindly took us out to the 2.4 ha site on the cliff edge above the Tasman sea. An estimated 40 pairs breed within the predator-proof fenced area, with an unknown number nesting on a nearby offshore stack (some petrel burrows can be seen clearly from the mainland). The area is covered with a mix of indigenous and exotic trees (the latter include banksias, Norfolk Island pine, and *Pinus* species), and a mass of indigenous monocots and dicots in the understorey and in open grassy patches (e.g. Nikau palm saplings, clumps of flax, *Muehlenbeckia*, etc.). Although the undergrowth looks tangled, there are clear patches.

A number of petrel burrows were visible from the boardwalk (which has been put in to prevent people from stepping on them). According to Barry, the birds usually come in about an hour after sunset, often flying in low before catching the updraft next to the cliff face and rising up to the cliff top where they then crash land through the vegetation to the ground close to their burrows. How they know where their burrows are is a mystery. Smell may be involved, as is the case with some other petrels. The incoming bird could also home in on calls made by either its partner or its chick, but this is cannot be the whole explanation as we heard no calling, either from the burrows or from the few birds that we saw. Two birds were seen on the ground, the first nearly flying into Barry Hartley as it crash-landed next to him. It scurried rapidly into a thicket of stems before disappearing, we think into a burrow at the base of a clump of flax. The following photograph (Figure 1) shows the second bird, which was found sitting quietly alongside the fence, adjacent to the walkway. Peter Fryer saw another 2-3 birds fly silently overhead as they crested the narrow promontory on the cliff top on which we were standing. Although the night was reasonably calm --- dark but largely cloudless --- the birds we saw only started to come in about 2 hours after sunset. All were completely silent.

From his experience, Barry feels that this is about the latest time in the season that one can come out and have a chance of seeing the birds. From now on, the adults begin to abandon the chicks, which continue to develop, using the body reserves that they've built up early in the fledging cycle. The chicks finally leave the colony in late November-early December.

The second photo attached here (Figure 2) shows the coast north of the lookout point. Part of the offshore stack on which grey-faced petrels breed --- possibly also fluttering shearwaters in summer --- can be seen on the right of the photo. My thanks to Barry Hartley and Peter Fryer for making this most enjoyable visit possible.

It rained the next day!

Peter Frost
Birding Wanganui



Figure 1. One of two Grey-faced Petrel seen on the ground at the Rapanui Grey-faced Petrel colony, Tongaporutu



Figure 2. View north from the Rapanui Grey-faced Petrel colony, showing the tall eroded cliffs and actual and incipient offshore stacks.