

DOES THE GREATER SHEARWATER REACH THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC?

By JOHN JENKINS

Several times towards the end of last year a very large shearwater, dark above and white below and with a black cap, was seen to the north of this country. These birds were not interested in the ship and therefore a good view was not obtained until 31/12/67, when a single bird was seen at about 50 feet.

From subsequently comparing various references against field notes, this bird and others seen in the same region, and one on 24/7/68 in the Cook Strait area, appear to be the Greater Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*). Careful notes were taken.

One bird was seen in company with six Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (*P. pacificus*). It was noticeably larger in both body size and wing span. Alexander (1) gives wing-span of *pacificus* as 11.5 inches and length 15.5 inches and of *gravis* wing 12 to 13 inches and length 18 to 21 inches. Rowan (3) gives the wing of a juvenile bird at the breeding grounds as 13.82 inches (350 mm.).

The dark cap was outstanding, there being a whitish band completely around the back of the neck. The black came down below the eye in a line with the gape.

Roux and Jouanin (2) when speaking of *gravis* state — "In that species a deep brown crown contrasts sharply with a pale nape and pure white throat."

The tail was long and dark above and whitish below. The rump seemed dark and there was no apparent sign of the white at the base of the upper tail, which is said to be a field character of *gravis*. It seems that this white area can be variable in width and could be so small in some birds as to be invisible in the field. Hagen (4) states the band can be broad up to 22 mm., or narrow and barred with grey and in one specimen mostly through wear, only two lateral spots showing.

The large black eye standing out against the darkness of the cap was noted, and is apparent in all the photographs of *gravis*.

The bill was recorded as long and all dark with no apparent variations in colour. There was a dark area before the wing reaching down onto the upper belly but not forming a complete band.

The brown patch on the lower belly was not seen. However as most sightings were made looking down on the birds, this could have been missed. Hagen (4) says this again is a variable character and in one specimen was represented by only a brown tinge in the middle of the lower breast and an up-and-down placed V on the abdomen.

The underwing was seen well and appeared wholly white with a narrow black edge, both fore and aft.

In their manner of flight these birds resembled *bulleri* or *pacificus*. They flew low over the sea with very little banking or turning and mostly on an even keel, the wing flapping being a slow and definite movement.

The sighting of these shearwaters in December and January at the height of the breeding season would seem to indicate that they were wandering juveniles whom the breeding urge was not strong enough to drive back to the Tristan Group. The sighting off the Cook Strait in July could well indicate that odd birds do regularly visit this region throughout the year.

It is to be hoped that a beach specimen will be collected in New Zealand to confirm the presence of this shearwater in our off-shore waters.

It is of interest to note that both these areas of sightings have been in known whaling grounds. Murphy (5) states "Whales or porpoises, according to Wynne Edwards, invariably have an attendant flock. The birds seem to feed to some extent upon cetacean feces, which may account in part for the large numbers of cephalopod beaks found in their stomachs."

RECORDED SIGHTINGS (See Map)

- (1) 31/12/67: 25°45'S. 176°45' E.
Sea temp. 80°F.
- (2) 31/12/67: 28°42'S. 176°12'E.
Sea temp. 78°F.
- (3) 3/1/68: 32°23'S. 175°25'E.
Sea temp. 75°F.
- (4) 24/1/68: 32°00'S. 175°18'E.
Sea temp. 75°F.
- (5) 24/7/68: 42°20'S. 174°39'E.
Sea temp. 51°F.

REFERENCES

- (1) ALEXANDER, W. B.: "Birds of the Ocean." 1955.
- (2) ROUX, F., & JOUANIN, C.: "Studies of less familiar birds. 147 Cory Shearwater. British Birds Vol. 61, No. 4. Page 163."
- (3) ROWAN, M. K.: "The Greater Shearwater (*P. gravis*) at its breeding ground. Ibis Vol. 94, No. 1, page 107."
- (4) HAGEN, Y.: "Birds of Tristan de Cunha. Results of the Norwegian scientific expedition to Tristan de Cunha 1937-1938. Oslo 1952."
- (5) MURPHY, R. C.: "Oceanic Birds of South America. Vol. 2, 1936, page 663."

