

# SEABIRD OBSERVATIONS AROUND THE KINGDOM OF TONGA

By J. A. F. JENKINS

---

## ABSTRACT

Observations on seabirds in Tongan waters during 18 voyages over a two year period are detailed. Of particular interest are records of the Giant Petrel, Black-winged Petrel, Herald Petrel, and Audubon's Shearwater and illustrations are given of specimens of the two latter species.

The following observations were recorded during 18 voyages to the Tongan islands made over a two year period. No consistent observing was possible but as birds were seen and could be identified they were recorded.

### Giant Petrel, *Macronectes giganteus*:

As previously reported by me (Jenkins 1967), one bird was seen in Ha'apai Harbour on 10 August 1967, wind E 30 kts, air temperature 74° F, sea temperature 70° F. It is to be noted that this was the first time I had seen this species in Tonga and that it was not seen again.

### Wedge-tailed Shearwater, *Puffinus pacificus*:

Birds were seen throughout the Tongan islands in small numbers at all times of the year. However, in the summer months, large numbers have been seen about the islands of Toku and Fonualei to the north of the Vava'u group. On 29 October 1967 approximately 800 birds were seen in this area, the sea temperature being 83° F. All birds seen were of the dark phase, as always seems to be the case in the South West Pacific, no light phase birds ever having been seen by me. In light winds the horizontal flight of these birds is very like the flight of Buller's Shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*) and the long tail is most noticeable although one has to be very fortunate to see the wedge shape in the field.

A bird that landed aboard on 28 December 1967 had a fine ribbing of very light colour over all the plumage of the upper wing and back and, from a distance, this gave the upper surface a much lighter colour than is usual for this species.

### Black-winged Petrel, *Pterodroma hypoleuca nigripennis*:

On 28 November 1967 north of Ofolanga Island in the Ha'apai group at 19° 30' S, 174° 26' W, a Black-winged Petrel landed aboard and was caught and banded. The sea temperature was 77° F. The measurements were — wing 216 mm, tail 106 mm, bill 24 mm, tarsus 32 mm, toe 37 mm. This species seems to be attracted to the lights of a ship and it is not unusual to see them onboard about Fiji and

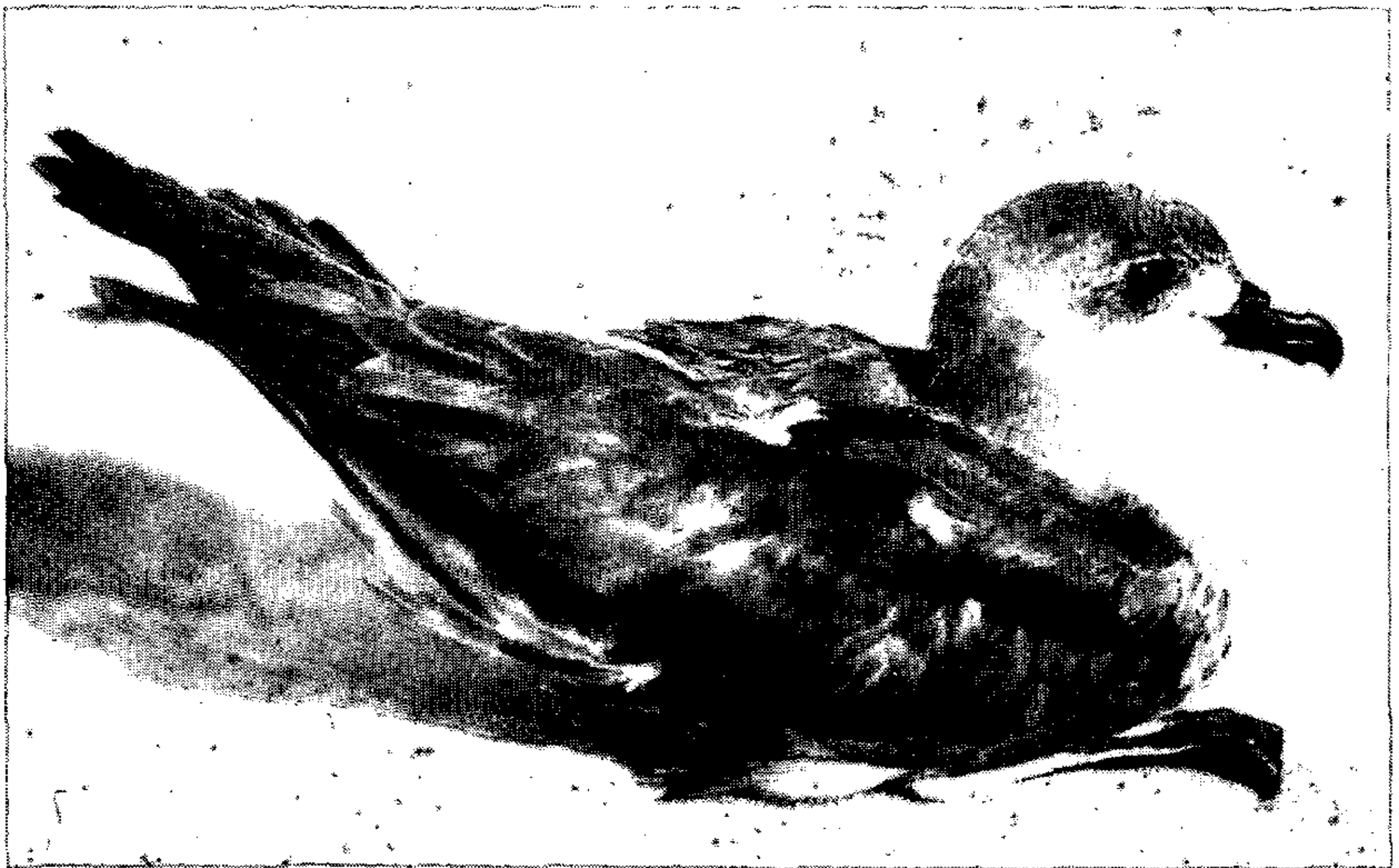


FIGURE 1 — Herald Petrel (*Pterodroma heraldica*) found in passenger's baggage at Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 16 July 1966.

Photo: J. Jenkins

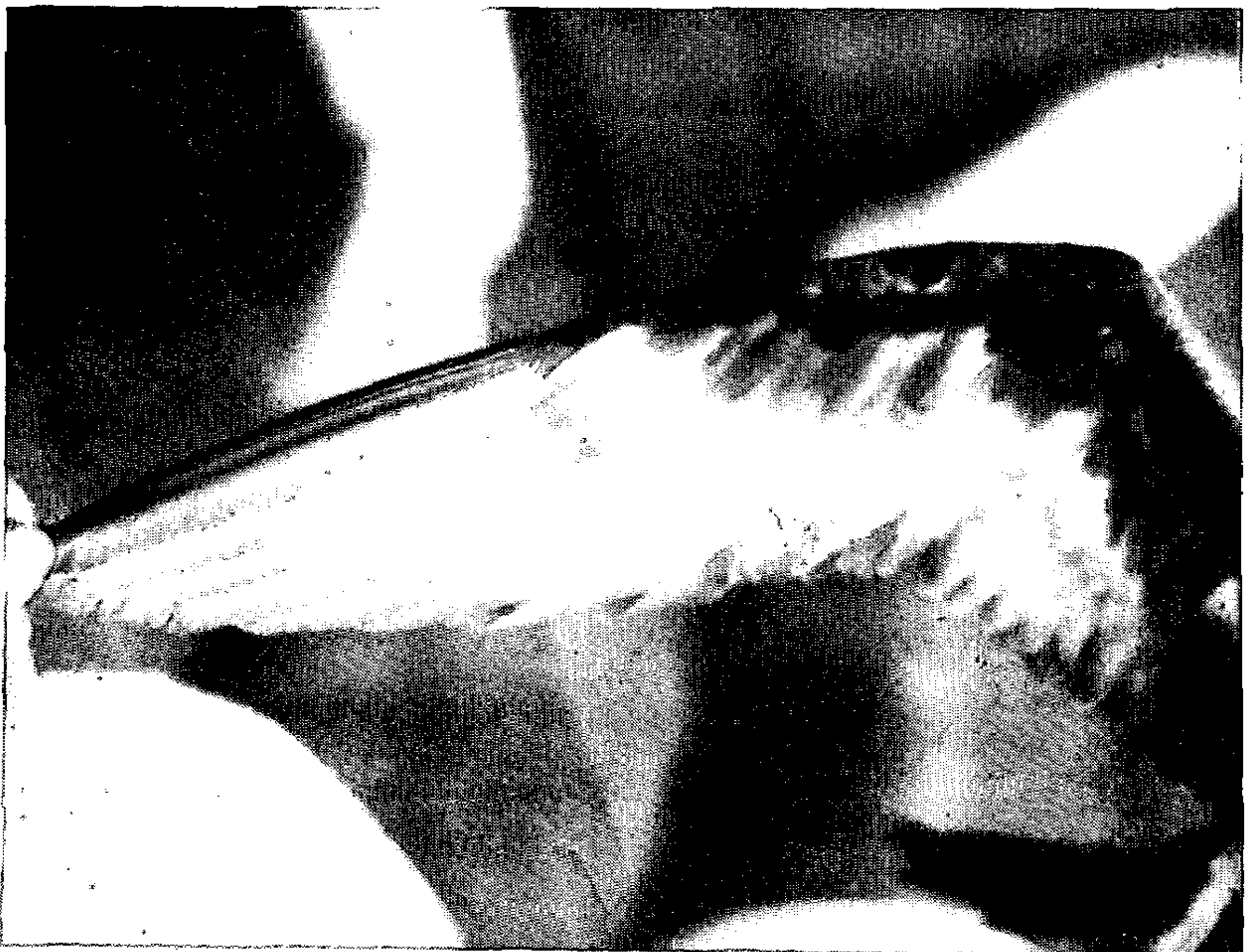


FIGURE 2 — Herald Petrel (*Pterodroma heraldica*), underwing.

Photo: J. Jenkins

northern New Zealand. However, this is, as far as I can ascertain, the first time it has been recorded for Tonga. I have never seen the Black-winged Petrel there before or since.

Herald Petrel, *Pterodroma heraldica*:

On 16 July 1966 a petrel was recovered from the baggage of a deck passenger on arrival at Nuku'alofa (Figs. 1-2). Such baggage proved a very fruitful source of supply of birds for banding since any bird that landed onboard was inevitably collected by the island people travelling on deck, a common method of travel on ships in the South West Pacific. When caught, the birds' wings and legs are tied together and they are destined to be kept as pets or eaten. However, in the majority of cases, once the captor was shown bird-bands and the system of banding explained, these birds were readily handed over for banding and release.

This particular petrel had landed on board during the night while the vessel was stopped about 15 miles off the port. It posed a problem of identification but, from photographs and measurements, it was identified by Dr W. R. P. Bourne as *Pterodroma heraldica* (see also Shorthouse 1967). The measurements were — wing 263 mm, tail 107 mm, bill 27 mm, tarsus 32 mm, toe 45 mm. Dr Bourne said that these measurements were slightly small in respect of the wing and tail and he thought that this could indicate that this was a young bird not yet fully grown. Two birds of this species were taken off the island of Hongatonga by the Whitney Expedition in July 1925.

Audubon's Shearwater, *Puffinus lherminieri*:

On 4 September 1967 while 7 miles north of Ofolanga Island at 19° 28' S, 174° 31' W, sea temperature 79° F, a bird of this species landed on deck and was caught, photographed (Fig. 3), banded and released. The measurements were — wing 197 mm, tail 92 mm, bill 23 mm, tarsus 37 mm, toe 42 mm. The mottling of the undertail coverts and the underwing pattern can be seen in the accompanying photographs (Figs 4-5). According to King (1967), this species has been reported from Tonga once before, an old sight record.

On 26 November 1967, north of the Vava'u group at 18° 10' S, 174° 00' W, sea temperature 82° F, wind E 18 kts, three birds were seen close alongside the ship. Their flight in this wind consisted of a lot of gliding between the wing beats and it appeared that the wing beats were not as rapid as those of the Fluttering Shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*).

Tropic Birds, *Phaeton lepturus* and *P. rubricauda*:

The White-tailed Tropic Bird is the common species, the Red-tailed having been seen on only a few occasions. The habit of the Tropic Birds of flying close to the masts and wireless aerials is very noticeable by day. That they do the same at night is undoubted as



FIGURE 3 — Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), 19° 28' S, 174° 31' W, 7 miles north of Ofolanga Island, Ha'apai Group, Tonga, 4 September 1967.

Photo: J. Jenkins

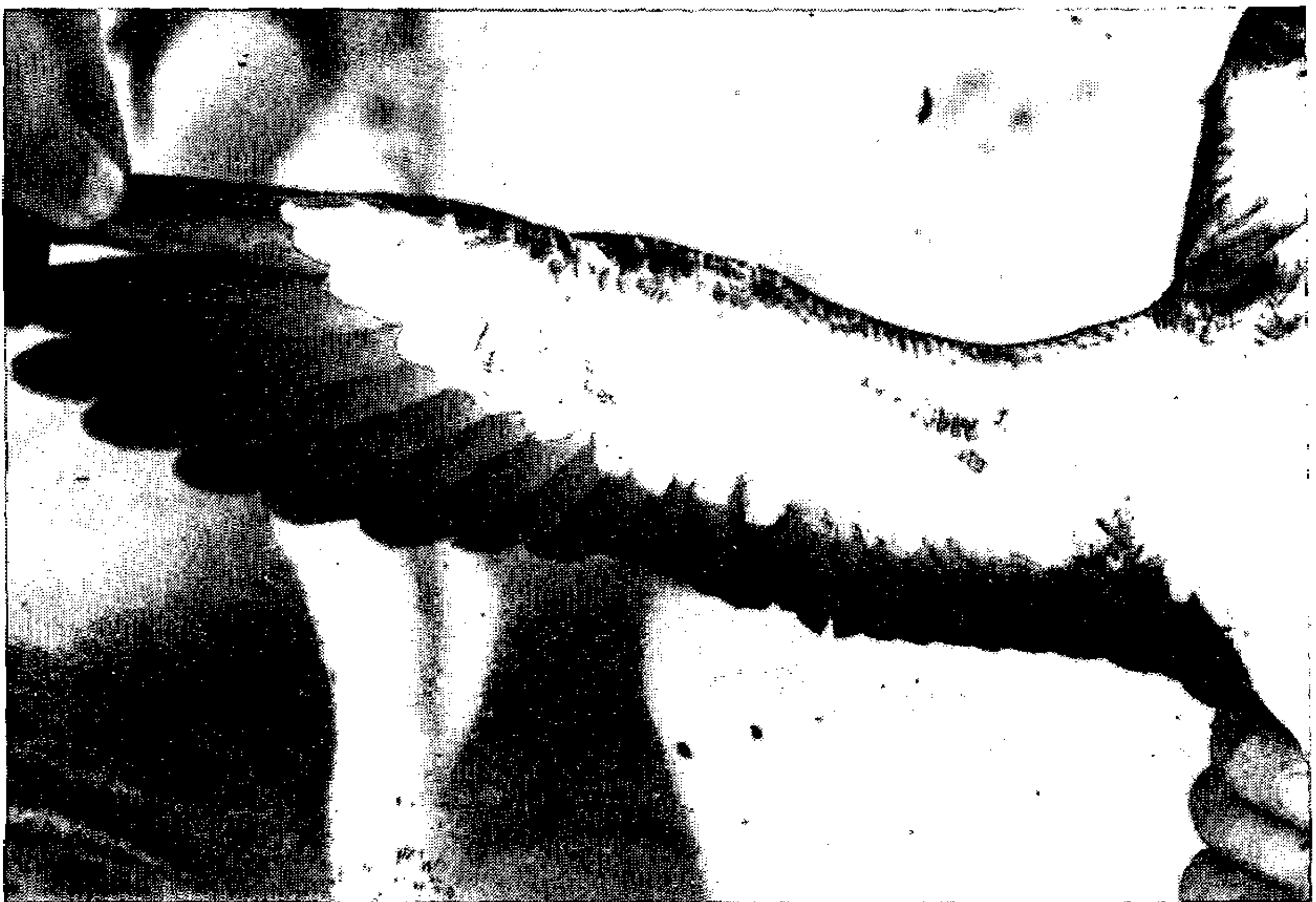


FIGURE 4 — Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), underwing.

Photo: J. Jenkins





FIGURE 5 — Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), undertail.

Photo: J. Jenkins

their calls can be heard frequently during the hours of darkness. This probably accounts for the frequency with which they are picked up off the deck at night after having flown into various wires up aloft. Tropic Birds are recovered in greater numbers by this means than any other seabirds in this area.

Blue-faced Booby, *Sula dactylatra*:

On 29 October 1967, off the north of the Vava'u group, about 30 birds were seen, 10 of which were in adult plumage, the rest being immature or sub-adult. The birds were not in the least interested in the ship, being busy feeding. This was an unusual sighting as there were three species of booby, Brown, Red-footed, and Blue-faced, present at the one time.

Brown Booby, *Sula leucogaster*:

These boobies are seen about at all times of the year, always in small numbers and usually just one or two at a time. The channel buoys at Nuku'alofa always seem to have a few birds sitting on them and the same is usually true of the entrance buoys at Ha'apai. A few birds are always seen at the northern end of the Vava'u group.

Red-footed Booby, *Sula sula*:

On 27 December 1967, at 20° 15' S, 175° 08' W, 15 miles west of the Nomuka group, a Red-footed Booby landed onboard and was caught and banded. The measurements were — wing 362 mm, tail 225 mm (to end of one feather which was much longer than the rest, but excluding this feather the tail measured 175 mm), bill 74 mm, tarsus 32 mm, toe 69 mm.

On 25 December 1967, off Late Island at 18° 48' S, 174° 39' W, sea temperature 83° F, about 300 birds were seen of which about one third were in adult plumage. All were flying close about the island and feeding in the shallow water inshore. A number of immature birds landed with difficulty on the ship's wireless aerial and sat there with much wing waving for up to ten minutes at a time. On one occasion there were five birds sitting together on the aerial. I have never seen Red-footed Boobies around the southern islands of Tonga and never off the northern islands before in such numbers. It could, therefore, be argued that Late is their breeding ground.

Frigate Birds:

I have never been fortunate enough to see Frigate Birds in Tongan waters although one would expect the Lesser Frigate to be in evidence there.

Sooty Tern, *Sterna fuscata*:

These terns are to be seen at most times of the year at the northern end of the Tonga group around the islands of Toku and Fonualei. When passing these islands at night, especially if it is raining, birds are frequently found on the decks. On one occasion 6 birds were recovered, one of which was dead with a broken neck. It was later sent to the Auckland Museum. The terns were noticeably absent from this area on 29 October 1967 when not a single one was seen. They are also to be seen about the other Tongan islands in the roving parties that one meets in all tropical waters.

Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii*:

These terns are seen in both Nuku'alofa and Ha'apai harbours, always in small numbers. I have never seen more than 6 birds at a time and they are usually in groups of two or three. They seem to be there all the year round.

Grey Ternlet or Blue Grey Noddy, *Procelsterna cerulea*:

While never having been close enough for positive identification, I feel that the small blue grey tern-like birds seen frequently north of Vava'u can only have been of this species. They seem to feed in calm water directly in the lee of the cliffs sheltered from the prevailing South-easterly Trade Winds.

Common Noddy, *Anous stolidus*:

Seen frequently about all the islands of Tonga, this noddy seems to be very abundant near the smaller islands off Nuku'alofa and can frequently be seen in large numbers feeding about the reefs in the harbour itself. A party of 200 plus were seen off Vava'u on 26 November 1967.

White-capped Noddy, *Anous minutus*:

Common throughout the Tongan islands, it is frequently seen in large numbers at the north end of Vava'u and in Nuku'alofa harbour. The alternate name of Black Noddy helps to distinguish it from the Common or Brown Noddy. Seen together, the blackness of the White-capped Noddy is very noticeable against the brownness of the Common Noddy. Once fixed in the mind, this colour difference becomes a major feature of identification in the field.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- ALEXANDER, W. B. 1955. Birds of the ocean. A handbook for voyagers. New and revised edition. Pp. xii + 1-282, pls 1-88. London: Putnam.
- JENKINS, J. A. F. 1967. Unusual records of birds at sea. *Notornis* XIV (3): 153.
- KING, W. B. 1967. Seabirds of the Tropical Pacific Ocean. Preliminary Smithsonian Identification Manual. Pp. xxxii + 1-126, text maps, pls 1-11. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- SHORTHOUSE, J. F. 1967. Notes on seabirds on Vatu Ira Island, Fiji — September 1966. *Sea Swallow* 19: 35-38, 2 figs.

Capt. John Jenkins,

M.V. "Kaimiro,"

Union Steam Ship Co. of NZ Ltd,

and

14 Lochiel Road,

Remuera,

Auckland