

SEABIRD OBSERVATIONS BETWEEN NEW ZEALAND AND FIJI

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ABSTRACT

Seabirds seen during a yacht voyage from Auckland, New Zealand, to Lautoka, Fiji, between 30 April and 7 May 1977, and during the return voyage to Whangarei between 22 May and 1 June are listed. Field characters of *Pterodromas* and Storm Petrels are illustrated.

INTRODUCTION

The following notes have been extracted from a seabird log made during the yacht race from Auckland to Lautoka on the Whangarei sloop *Amoureuse*. Weather and sea conditions were unpleasant, with a gale for the first few days of the race, and more gales on the return voyage. Some seabirds flew close to the boat, so that their diagnostic features were clearly seen, while other fast-moving or distant petrels were difficult to identify.

SPECIES OBSERVED

WANDERING ALBATROSS *Diomedea exulans*

Birds in a variety of plumages were logged from the outer Hauraki Gulf to about 33°00'S on the outward voyage, and from 27°00'S, on the homeward voyage. Many albatrosses were too distant for certain identification.

BLACK-BROWED MOLLYMAWK *Diomedea melanophris*

Quite common, being noted from the Gulf to about 30°40'S on the outward voyage, and from 27°00'S on the return voyage. Often there would be several following in the wake at once. They readily took food scraps tossed overboard.

Diomedea sp.

A mollymawk with the rather odd combination of a pale head, dusky bill and darkish underparts was seen on 29 May at 28°35'S 174°48'E, where the sea temperature was 19.5°C. The plumage reminded me somewhat of that of a juvenile Wandering Albatross, but the bird was smaller, and had the dark back of a mollymawk. Dr W. R. P. Bourne (pers. comm.) thinks this bird may have been an aberrant, possibly melanistic juvenile Black-brow, rather than a straggler of north Pacific origin.

LIGHT-MANTLED SOOTY ALBATROSS *Phoebastria palpebrata*

One circled the boat at dawn on 31 May, at 33°14'S 174°48'E, sea temperature 18.2°C. John Jenkins tells me he has also noted this species in these latitudes.

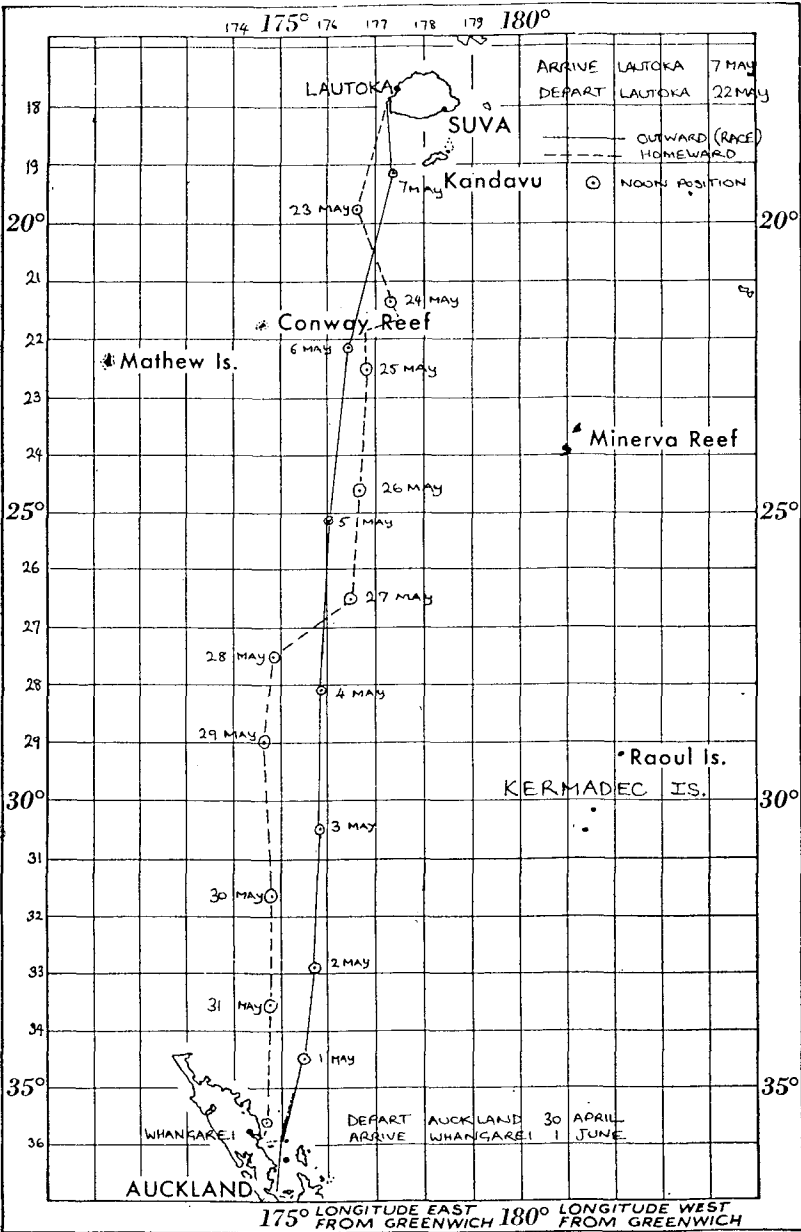


FIGURE 1 — Yacht's tracks over which observations were made.

GIANT PETREL *Macronectes giganteus*

Logged on the return voyage, from 33°19'S onwards.

CAPE PIGEON *Daption capense*

Seen on the return voyage, the first at 31°17'S on 30 May. Odd ones recorded from there on, following astern.

FAIRY PRION *Pachyptila turtur*

First seen on the return voyage at 31°37'S on 30 May, sea temperature 18.9°C. Small flocks were logged regularly from there to Bream Head.

WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER *Puffinus pacificus*

Groups of these shearwaters were seen west of Kadavu Island on 7 May, sea temperature 26°C. On the return voyage they were noted as far as 21°00'S, on 24 May, sea temperature 25.5°C.

BULLER'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus bulleri*

Odd ones noted on 1 May, when leaving the New Zealand coast. They were also seen in Fijian waters; on 23 May, one logged moving north at 19°30'S 176°45'E, sea temperature 26°C. At 27°35'S 175°47'E on 28 May one seen heading north-east, sea temperature 21°C. It may reasonably be assumed that these birds are part of the northward migration of Buller's from N.Z. during winter. Records of Buller's from Fiji are few (Clunie, Kinsky & Jenkins 1978). The bird seen at 19°30'S 176°45'E, was probably on the very western edge of the migration path, the centre of which may pass near Rarotonga and Tahiti (John Jenkins, pers. comm.).

SOOTY SHEARWATER *Puffinus griseus*

Birds were noted over a wide latitudinal range from the outer Hauraki Gulf at 36°00'S to 21°53'S, on both voyages between 30 April and 1 June.

AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus lherminieri*

A small seabird with dark upperparts, broad, dark underwing margins, and nearly all-dark head, seen at 19°35'S 177°15'E on 7 May, could have been this species. This bird has been illustrated in a previous issue of Notornis (Jenkins 1973). Another was logged on 25 May at 22°55'S 177°02'E, sea temperature 23.8°C.

GREY-FACED PETREL *Pterodroma macroptera*

None was logged in Fijian waters, but this was the most common species at sea further south towards New Zealand. On the homeward voyage, the first birds were noted at about 20°S on 27 May, sea temperature 22°C. They would often approach from astern, flying close to the boat, following for a while before veering off and vanishing.

BLACK-CAPPED PETREL *Pterodroma externa cervicalis*

Several of these handsome large gadflies were seen from 22°45'S, sea temperature 24°C, to 27°30'S, sea temperature 21°C, between 25 and 28 May. This area is not far north of the Kermadecs, the breeding ground for this species (Fig. 1). A *Pterodroma externa*-type petrel seen at 33°00'S 175°40'E, sea temperature 19.5°C, on 2 May showed

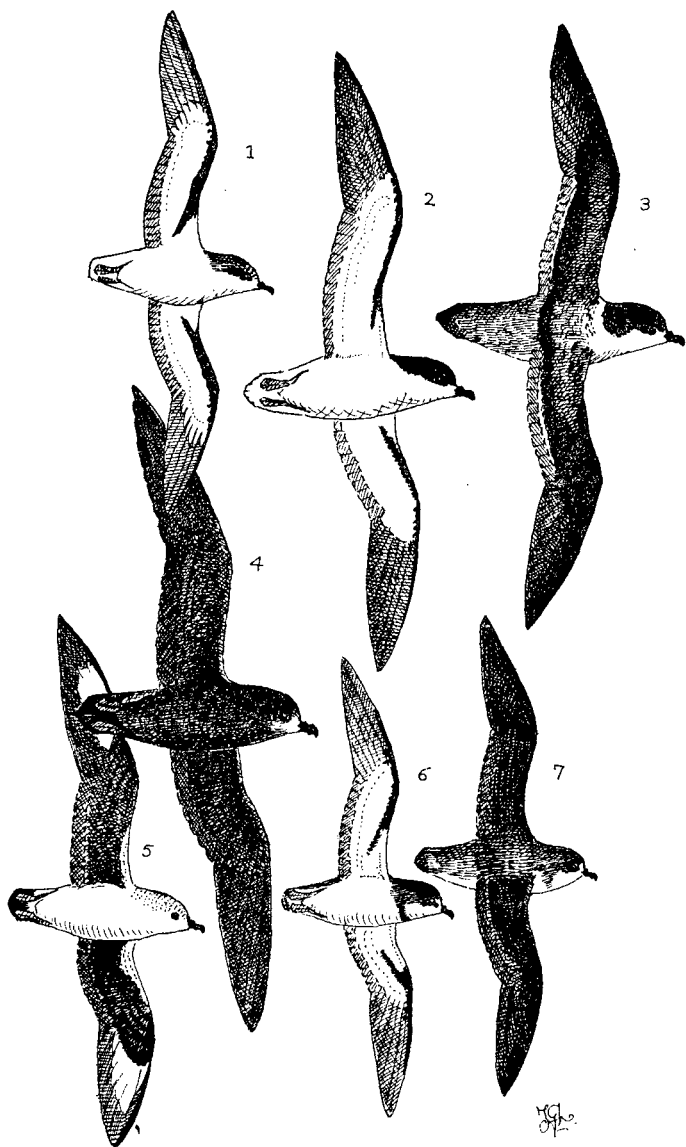


FIGURE 2 — Pterodromas. 1. Black-winged Petrel. 2. & 3. Black-capped Petrel. 4. Grey-faced Petrel. 5. Kermadec Petrel. 6. & 7. Collared Petrel.

some diagnostic features, such as dark upperparts and shoulder markings, and dark leading underwing margins. However, it lacked the definite white collar of the Black-capped Petrel. *Pterodroma e. externa*, the Juan Fernandez Petrel may best fit this description.

KERMADEC PETREL *Pterodroma neglecta*

A medium-sized petrel, with diagnostic white underwing patches, pale head and belly, swept past the boat heading north-east at 26°55'S 176°25'E, sea temperature 21.5°C, on 27 May. It was probably a light-phased bird of this species. Compare the size and plumage of *P. neglecta* with other *Pterodroma* species in Figure 2.

COOKILARIA PETRELS

Numerous unidentified and distant Cookilarias were seen both near New Zealand and near Fiji. Near New Zealand, birds may have been Cook's (*Pterodroma cooki*), Pycroft's (*P. pycrofti*), or Black-winged Petrels (*P. nigripennis*), and near Fiji, Collared Petrels (*P. leucoptera brevipes*).

COLLARED PETREL *Pterodroma leucoptera brevipes*

These were quite easily identified with their distinctive grey collars and wide black leading under-wing margins (Fig. 2). The last Collared Petrel logged on the return voyage was at 22°35'S 176°55'E, sea temperature 23.5°C, on 25 May. This species is sometimes taken by the Fiji Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*), as shown by remains collected from the G.P.O. roof in Suva (Clunie 1976).

BLACK-WINGED PETREL *Pterodroma hypoleuca nigripennis*

These were logged from some distance off the New Zealand coast to about 30°S, sea temperature 20.5°C, on the outward voyage. A *joie de vivre* chase between two birds was seen. Unlike Collared Petrels, the Black-winged flies with high wheeling arcs. Compare these species in Figure 2.

WILSON'S STORM PETREL *Oceanites oceanicus*

A very dark storm petrel was seen closely at 30°00'S 175°55'E, sea temperature 20.5°C, on 3 May. The bird was all-black except for the characteristic white rump and flank patches. The only other species which fits this description is the dark phase of the White-bellied Storm Petrel from Lord Howe Island, which differs from the former species by having a slightly notched tail instead of a square one.

WHITE-BELLIED STORM PETREL *Fregetta grallaria*

One was logged on 5 May at 25°41'S 176°00'E, sea temperature 22.6°C. Its conspicuous white belly contrasted with the black head. The white rump and broad, dark underwing margins were clearly visible at close range. These birds breed during the winter on Macaulay Island in the Kermadecs, and at Lord Howe (Harper & Kinsky 1974), so are to be expected in these waters at that time of year. The two *Fregetta* species are compared in Figure 3.

BLACK-BELLIED STORM PETREL *Fregetta tropica*

Several of these distinctive storm petrels were logged on the homeward voyage between 22°45'S 177°02'E, sea temperature 23.8°C. on 25 May, and 29°09'S 174°37'E, sea temperature 19.5°C, on 29 May. The last birds recorded were seen closely as they flitted round the boat for several minutes, clearly displaying the black line down their bellies. This pair later flew off to the north-west.

WHITE-FACED STORM PETREL *Pelagodroma marina*

A number of these birds were seen during the morning of 1 June, soon after landfall about 25 miles north-east of Cape Brett. Falla, Sibson & Turbott (1966) state that this species is apparently absent from New Zealand waters during the winter. Perhaps some of them just move further off the coast for the winter and are thus less likely to be seen.

WHITE-TAILED TROPIC BIRD *Phaethon lepturus*

None was logged during the race from Auckland to Lautoka, but several were seen on the return voyage. The first was logged soon after clearing the Navula Passage, south of Nadi, on 22 May, sea temperature 27.5°C. More were recorded as far as 21°19'S 177°37'E, where the sea temperature was 25°C. Usually they flew over to have a close look at the boat, approaching with characteristic rapid, shallow wing beats. Sometimes they would soar at the masthead for several minutes. Jenkins (1973) noted similar behaviour of tropic birds at masts and wireless aerials on ships.

GANNET *Sula serrator*

Apart from those seen along the New Zealand coast, one was sighted at 31°55'S 174°54'E on 30 May, sea temperature 18.9°C.

BROWN BOOBY *Sula leucogaster*

Boobies were noted as far as 19°50'S on 23 May, sea temperature 26°C. They were very numerous near the Navula Light, and on the channel beacons at Malololailai Island. Groups of these birds often accompanied feeding noddy flocks. No definite Red-footed (*S. sula*) or Blue-faced Boobies (*S. dactylatra*) were seen. However there seemed to be many variably coloured birds among the distant booby flocks. These might well have been the Red-footed Booby, a species which has various plumage phases, as noted by Hindwood, Keith & Serventy (1963).

LESSER FRIGATE BIRD *Fregata ariel*

Two male Lessers showing distinct white flank patches were seen overhead at Malololailai, south-west of Nadi, on 20 May, sea temperature 27.5°C.

FRIGATE BIRD sp.

One seen flying high, heading west on 23 May at 19°40' 176°42'E, sea temperature 26°C. Observations by Clunie, Kinsky & Jenkins (1978) indicate both Lesser and Greater Frigates occur in Fijian waters. They add that separating these two in the field is not easy unless sure diagnostic features are seen.

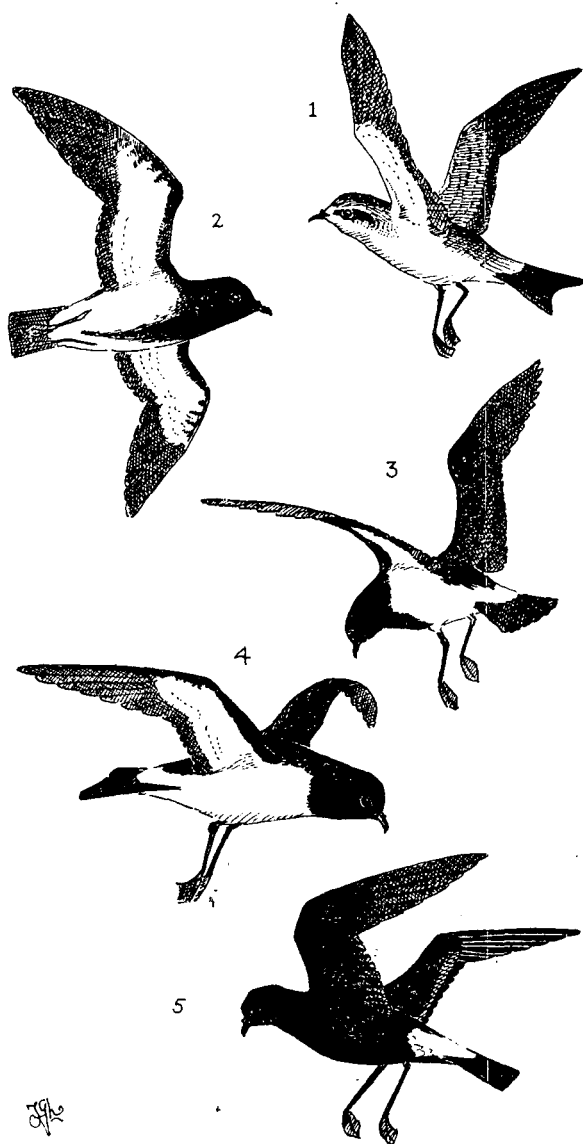


FIGURE 3 — Storm Petrels. 1. White-faced Storm Petrel. 2. & 3. Black-bellied Storm Petrel. 4. White-bellied Storm Petrel. 5. Wilson's Storm Petrel.

POMARINE SKUA *Stercorarius pomarinus*

A robust skua with paler areas on the undersides of its wings, pale rump, short tail and generally pale underparts, was probably this species. It was seen near the remains of a small petrel in the water on 23 May, at 19°43'S 176°41'E, sea temperature 26°C. This is the second record for Fijian waters, following that of Clunie, Kinsky & Jenkins (1978).

CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii*

Often logged off Nadi and along the coast of Viti Levu, but not outside the main reef.

BLACK-NAPED TERN *Sterna sumatrana*

A small flock of five was noted resting on the beach at Savala Islet about three miles west of Lautoka, on 14 May.

SOOTY TERN *Sterna fuscata*

Flocks of about 50 birds were recorded as the boat neared the Fiji coast on 7 May; sea temperature 26°C. These terns were flying buoyantly, wheeling about and swooping low over the sea. There were boobies feeding among them. The last Sooty Tern logged on the return voyage was sighted at 19°20'S 176°45'E, sea temperature 26°C, on 23 May.

COMMON NODDY *Anous stolidus*

Mixed flocks of noddies, boobies and small white terns were logged on 7 May from 19°30'S onwards, on the way to Lautoka.

WHITE-CAPPED NODDY *Anous minutus*

Flocks were seen near the Navula Light at the main reef entrance on 22 May, sea temperature 27.5°C. Unlike the Common Noddy, this species occurs mainly near the coast.

WHITE TERN *Gygis alba*

Well out to sea at 19°30'S were distant, pale shapes in the noddy flocks, which may have been this species, as they were small compared with the noddies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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