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SHORT NOTE

Distributional notes on the shy albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*): its presence off South America in the western Atlantic and eastern Pacific Oceans

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The shy albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*) complex is divided into 4 taxa. However, authors differ as to what species rank or level should be given to the terminal taxa (*e.g.,* see comments in Onley & Scofield 2007, Jimenez *et al.* 2009). For the purpose of this paper I follow Brooke (2004) for species name and rank, recognising shy albatross as a polytypic species, with 2 subspecies, *Thalassarche c. cauta* which breeds on islands of Tasmania and *Thalassarche c. steadi* which breeds on islands off New Zealand.

From early to mid Mar each year during 2005 to 2011, I sailed in the south Atlantic Ocean following the same route, between the Falklands (Malvinas) Is and Buenos Aires, Argentina. On 8 Mar 2008, I encountered a large number of shy albatrosses at approximately 41°02'S, 57°03' W. In 2 hours of observations I counted 18 birds, but no more than 3-4 at once. All individuals were immature birds (Fig. 1 a, b). The closest position from land measured using Google Earth was about 139 nm or 258 km SSW of Mar del Plata, Argentina. GPS data indicate that all the sightings were at the edge of the continental shelf. With the exception of the 2008 sightings the only other sighting of a shy albatross during the 7 passages through the area was of a single immature bird on 10 Mar 2010, at 40°30' S 56°58' W.

Marchant and Higgins (1990) reviewed the distribution of shy albatrosses across the southern seas, but questioned their presence in the western Atlantic. However, Brooke (2004) indicated a complete southern circumpolar distribution for the taxon. It is not clear how he reached that conclusion, but it seems to have been based on Brothers *et al*. (1997, 1998). Although Brothers *et al*. (1997, 1998) indicated that this taxon travels widely during its first 5 years of life, while being relatively sedentary after reaching maturity, and that some individuals reach South Africa, there was no mention of the taxon occurring in the western Atlantic. Onley & Scofield (2007) indicate that the dispersal of the shy albatross is poorly understood, probably because of the difficulty of distinguishing it from

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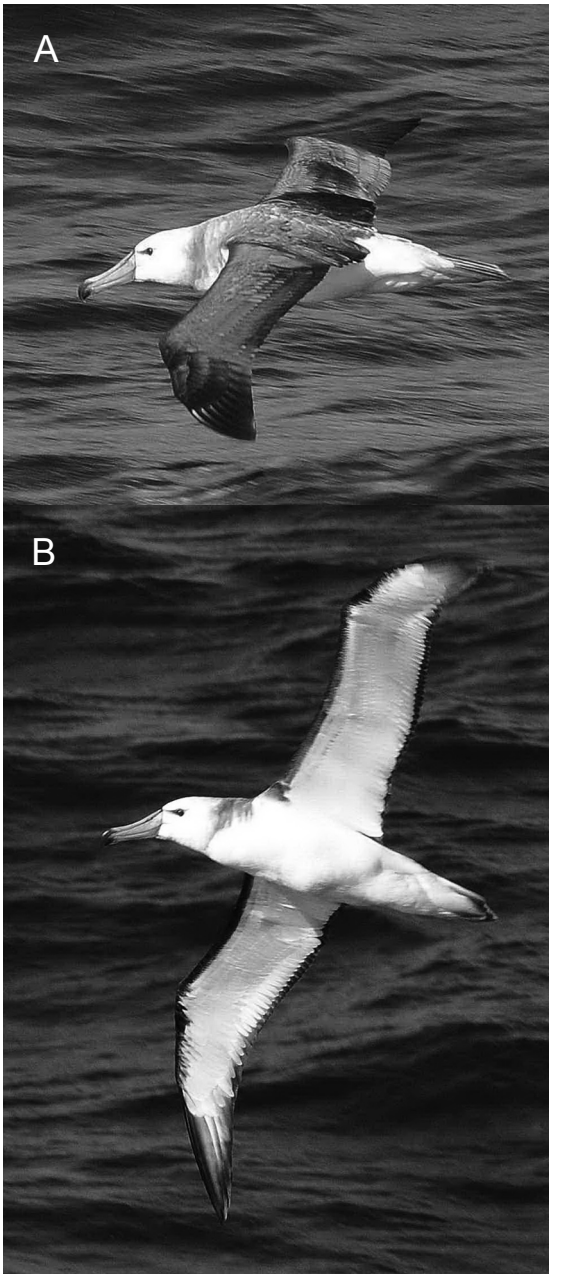

Fig. 1 (a, b). Immature individuals of shy albatrosses (*Thalassarche cauta*) in the western Atlantic at 41°02′S 57°03′ W on 8 Mar 2008.

other closely related taxa at sea, particularly when in immature plumage. Although their distribution map also questions this taxon's presence in the western Atlantic, they do indicate its distribution is throughout the southern oceans between 10-65° S. However, recent findings by Phalan *et al*. (2004) of an individual in South Georgia and by Jimenez *et al*. (2009) of 5 birds caught by longline fishery, plus additional at sea observations of mostly immature birds (with the exception of 2 adults), off Uruguayan waters, indicate a more widespread distribution in the western Atlantic. Nevertheless, this taxon appears to be rare in the western Atlantic considering that *T. cauta* was observed only twice during 7 passages through the area where the taxon was observed, and that only in 2008 were several birds observed. Another consideration is that this taxon may be overlooked in the area due to its low numbers, irregular presence, and/or the difficulty in identification because most individuals seem to be immature (which is in accordance with the findings of Brothers *et al*. 1997, 1998, and Jimenez *et al*. 2009). The records reported by Jimenez *et al*. (2009) coincided with the records reported here that were along the end of the continental shelf and most were immature birds.

During one of over 20 observation trips on the eastern Pacific, off the coast from Valparaíso, on 4 Apr 2009, one adult *T.cauta* (Fig. 2) was observed and photographed among a group of about 40-45 albatrosses that were next to a fishing vessel. The group of albatrosses was comprised primarily of the Salvin's albatross (*Thalassarche salvini*), and included both adults and immatures. Marin (2004) placed the distribution of shy albatross as hypothetical for Chile since the inclusion of this taxon for the country was based on a single sight record of 2 individuals at the beginning of May 1983, near Valparaíso (Clark 1986). Subsequently, Couve & Vidal (2005) observed and photographed a single individual on 2 Nov 2004 off the coast of Quintero, province of Valparaíso. This was the 1st documented record of the taxon for Chile.

All major recent works and summaries on albatrosses and petrels (*e.g.*, Marchant & Higgins 1990, Brooke 2004, Onley & Scofield 2007), mistakenly describe the shy albatross as having a widespread distribution off western South America, to the point that Onley & Scofield (2007) erroneously indicated that it is common off western South America, especially in central and southern Chile. The distribution alleged by these authors is probably based on assumptions rather than on confirmed observations. Alternatively, the conclusion that *T. cauta* occurs in the region may be based on observations that includes or is a mix of both Salvin's and shy albatrosses. The adult bird reported here is only the 2nd documented individual for the country and the 3rd report of the taxon off the west coast of South America.

Thus *T. cauta* seems to rarely occur off either coast of South America, contrary to previous assumptions and when it does occur it is not every year and probably only in small numbers.

Fig. 2. Adult shy albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*) stands out in the middle among the Salvin's albatrosses (*T. salvini*) about 12 NM off Valparaiso on 4 Apr 2009.

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