

LETTER

The early specimens of the Wandering Albatross

It was useful of Medway (1993) to reprint the early information about the Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*, but some points still appear to require clarification.

1. It should be stressed how poor the knowledge of seabirds was in the mid eighteenth century, when no less an authority than Linnaeus could still confuse albatrosses with frigatebirds, and include the Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* in the same genus. One suspects that he only mentioned them at all because they were already famous birds, though he could not find an adequate description, so he felt it necessary to quote anything he could find! It does not seem satisfactory to discard the specimen of *Diomedea spadicea* in the Leverian Museum actually quoted by Latham as the type, especially when it may still exist in Vienna (although this was not checked), simply because Latham may have added some details from a drawing which he does not quote, so that they might equally well have come from anywhere.
2. It should also be emphasised that, with the exception of some notes and drawings from Cook's voyages, both the origin and fate of most of the other specimens described then is now unknown, and since they were doubtless poorly preserved most have presumably decomposed. Since Medway (1993: 156) appears puzzled why I should seek their remains in the British Museum (Natural History) or Royal College of Surgeons (Bourne 1989), these seemed the most likely depositories for any more durable relics. In fact early catalogues of the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons (Anon. 1831, serials 1391-1397; Owen 1855, serials 1189-1217) include:-

- 1381 1189 skeleton of *Diomedea exulans*- Cape of Good Hope, purchased 1828.
 1392 1194 skull/dried head of *Diomedea exulans*, W. Bullock.
 1393 1190 skull of *Diomedea exulans*, Hunterian.
 1192 left half skull of *Diomedea exulans*, Owen.
 1394 1193 (mutilated) skull of *Diomedea exulans*, Leach, 1825.
 1395 1191? skull of *Diomedea exulans*, Sir William Bryant, 1811.
 1195 mandibles of *Diomedea exulans*, W. Blizard.
 1196-1217 bones of *Diomedea exulans*, Hunterian.
 1396-7 right and left radii and ulnae of an albatross, Hunterian.

The great John Hunter's specimens were presumably the oldest, and his determination and prestige such that he secured anything available, possibly including Grew's skull from the Royal Society. Unfortunately it is not recorded where his specimens came from, though most were presumably derived from decaying mounted skins in the second half of the eighteenth century. Either 1196-1217 or 1381/1189 might be Edwards' skeleton. The Bullock head and Leach's skull (with a Great Auk's head) may have come from birds once in the Leverian or Banksian museums, and the date the skull was presented, 1825, may show when the historic original collection of mounted birds in the British Museum, including Cook

specimens, was destroyed. Sadly the Qvist Curator, Miss Elizabeth Allen, reports that these bones all appear to have been destroyed by the bombing in World War II. *Sic transit gloria mundi* ...

3. More can also be deduced from Medway's (1993) illustrations. Figure 1 shows that Sydney Parkinson's Chocolate Albatross had contrasting markings like fledgling Wanderers from the Tristan-Gough group *Diomedea exulans dabbenena*. Figure 2 shows Grew's head had the allometric proportions of a large bird, with the bill longer than the cranium, and also plates on the bill, with no dark line along the edge of the upper mandible, so it can hardly "equally well have been that of a Royal Albatross" *Diomedea epomophora* (Medway 1993: 155). Figure 3 shows Albin's head had a bill little longer than the cranium, and must have belonged to a smaller bird. Edwards' two medium-sized bills in figure 4 differ in shape and presumably belonged to different birds. Is it really satisfactory to convert measurements made to the nearest half inch or even foot to millimetres?
4. While most of these birds may well have been collected by East Indiamen, so that there has always been a presumption that they were taken off the Cape of Good Hope, this is not necessarily the case. Periodically the British used to go to war with the Dutch, and avoid the Cape. Even in peacetime outward-bound sailing ships might also go west with the trade-winds, visit Brasil instead of the Cape, then south to make their easting in the westerlies past Tristan, and turn north off Amsterdam Island, stopping at either of these colonies of distinct albatrosses for fresh food (Richards 1984). While they might then take a more direct route home, they were still more likely to be becalmed, with time to collect seabirds, during their long passages through the lower latitudes of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans with their distinct albatrosses, than off what was once called the Cape of Storms.
4. At the risk of compounding the confusion described by Medway (1993), it should also be pointed out that it was not really Osbert Salvin, but Godman (1907-10), who propagated the belief that nominate *D.e. exulans* bred in the New Zealand area. The reason it persisted in a region receiving attention from that arch-splitter the late Gregory Mathews appears to be that the few specimens from the area in foreign collections are in a confusing mixture of juvenile types of plumage rather similar to Edwards' figure (Medway 1993: fig. 4; but these hand-coloured plates may also vary) from both local and distant populations, so that until the natives bestirred themselves the situation remained obscure. While I left the description of new forms to them (Robertson & Warham 1992), John Warham informs me that, while they could not include illustrations showing the full range of variation for their new forms *D.e. antipodensis* of the Antipodes Islands and *D.e. gibsoni* of the Auckland Islands, it is shown by Warham & Bell (1979) and Bailey & Sorensen (1962).

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