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Could the Black-toed Petrel (*Procellaria melanopus*) have been Murphy's Petrel (*Pterodroma ultima*)?

Medway (1993) has performed a useful service assembling descriptions of the Black-toed Petrel of Latham (1785), later given the scientific name *Procellaria melanopus* by Gmelin (1789). Unfortunately his identification of this lost specimen as a Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata*, and indeed almost any other identification, presents a problem for seabird nomenclature, since technically this old name would usually take priority over any other for the species concerned. Such problems have provided much business for the International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature in recent years; it includes measures to preserve the names *Hyrobatidae* for all the storm-petrels, *Macronectes giganteus* for the Southern Giant Petrel, and *Catharacta (skua) lonnbergi* for the most widespread form of large southern skua, which one might have expected to receive more support from New Zealand.

In point of fact the name *P. melanopus* first appears to have been applied by D.C. Solander in MS Z4 in the British Museum (Natural History) to Kermadec Petrels *Pterodroma neglecta* collected in the South Pacific during Cook's first voyage of 1768-1771 (Lysaght 1959: 361). Unfortunately this description was not published at that time, however, and another species said to have been taken off North America during Cook's third voyage of 1776-1780 across the whole width of the Pacific between New Zealand and the Bering Strait (Lysaght 1959: Appendix C) called the Black-toed Petrel by Latham (1785) was eventually also named *Procellaria melanopus* by Gmelin (1789). It was thirteen inches long, with a bill of 1½ inches, dusky black upperparts and pale hoary lead underparts, a pale, finely-speckled, face and throat, and pale legs with the final third of the toes black.

The measurements are of little help in its identification, since it is difficult to measure the overall length of birds at the best of times, and especially in specimens which may have been stretched in skinning and then distorted in mounting. It is also usually uncertain in such cases if the bill measurement is for the exposed culmen or the whole length from the tip to the angle of the mouth. Since in addition Latham only gave measurements to half an inch (12.7 mm) they are only accurate enough to show that he must have been describing some medium-sized species in the genus *Pterodroma*.

The description is a little more helpful. Since the bird is said to have had a pale face "marked with minute dusky specks", its appearance must have been examined rather carefully, and this description should exclude any normal Mottled Petrel, which shows much white on the face and underparts, dark Kermadec Petrel, which is shaded and not speckled, and dark Herald Petrel *P. heraldica*, which is mottled. Similarly, if it had pale feet (presumably pink in life) with dark tips to the toes, this should exclude the large, dark Providence Petrel *P. solandri*, and a dark small Collared Petrel *P. (leucoptera) brevipes*, which may have a speckled face, because apparently they do not normally have contrasting dark tips to the toes.

There still remain three possible dark forms with speckled faces and pink feet with dark tips to the toes, Murphy's Petrel *P. ultima*, the rare dark phase of the Soft-plumaged petrel *P. mollis* (Bourne 1983), which might have been collected between Europe and the Pacific, or hypothetically an unusually dark Mottled Petrel. Since as it happens Murphy's Petrel, which breeds in the central South Pacific, has now been found to make a similar northward migration to the Mottled Petrel up the west coast of North America reaching the southern Gulf of Alaska (Bailey *et al.* 1989, Zimmer 1992), surely it seems most likely to have been this species? Unfortunately, in the absence of the original specimen there must still be an element of doubt about its identity, which must therefore remain indeterminable, avoiding any problem with the scientific nomenclature.

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