

SHORT NOTE

The occurrence of Wilson's storm petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) in New Zealand waters

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Wilson's storm petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) nests very commonly along the coastline of Antarctica, migrating trans-equatorially in winter. It is surprising, therefore, that Marchant & Higgins (1990) record few sightings from New Zealand waters, state that it is rarely seen north of 54°S, and mention only 14 records to 1988. Bartle & Cheshire (in Marchant & Higgins 1990) are quoted as considering it "particularly scarce in New Zealand waters at all times of the year." However, Turbott (1990), while agreeing that it is "uncommon on passage past New Zealand", reports over 40 records. Since then there have been a number of sightings recorded in *Notornis* (Classified Summarised Notes 1992-1997).

Apart from 1 on the deck of a ship near the Auckland Islands in January 1991 (O'Donnell & West 1992), these records were all for the east coast between Gisborne and the Mokohinau Islands. There is 1 record for January of a bird near the Rurima Rocks, Bay of Plenty (BoP) on 18 Jan 1996 (Parrish & Lock 1997) and 1 in October c 3 km off Matata, BoP, on 25 Oct 1990 (Taylor & Parrish 1992), but the rest are all for March to May when one would expect birds to be migrating north through New Zealand waters. The earliest sightings during this migration period are 1 near Motiti Island, BoP, on 17 Mar 1993 (Taylor & Parrish 1994), and 1 offshore from Tolaga Bay on 19 Mar 1995, with another bird seen there on 3 Apr 1995 (Parrish & Lock 1996). In 1990, there were 7 sightings in April and 1 in May of birds flying northwards, eliciting the comment that "this species may be a regular passage migrant through East Coast waters in late autumn." (Taylor & Parrish 1991). The 1990 records were 3 near the Mokohinau Islands on 13 Apr 1990 and 1 on 16 Apr 1990; singles near Little Barrier Island on 23 Apr 1990 and 20 May 1990; one at Astrolabe Reef, BoP, on 27 Apr 1990, and 1 out from Tolaga Bay on 15 Apr 1990 (Taylor & Parrish 1991). In

addition, Imber recorded 1 flying south at the Chatham Islands on 2 Dec 1983, its identification having been reconsidered after seeing 2 among the Bounty Islands on 11 Dec 1990 (Imber 1994). I consider the records by Vooren, who found this species common on the Bounty Platform and scarce on the Pukaki rise in December 1970 (Vooren 1973), probably to be mistaken, as he makes no mention of the black-bellied storm petrel (*Fregetta tropica*), a superficially similar species, which from personal observation I have found to be much commoner in those waters.

Working as a fisheries observer for the New Zealand Ministry of Fisheries, I have spent many months at sea around New Zealand over the past 12 years, and have recorded Wilson's storm petrels on a number of occasions. Until recently, the only time I have seen birds in any numbers was during April 1990, whilst fishing off Hawke's Bay, about 40°S 178°E (locations rounded to a half degree). I saw birds regularly from 10 April when about 10 were seen, through to 23 April. On 13 April there were at least 300 scattered feeding over a large area of sea, and on 23 April I saw 5 birds, then a group of about 50 feeding fairly close together. It is interesting that these sightings coincide with those further north up the east coast of the North Island (Taylor & Parrish 1991).

Other autumn records of mine are of 1 north of Dunedin on 3 Mar 1993, 1 south of the Snares on 6 Mar 1993, and 4 just south-west of Cape Reinga on 26 Apr 1998. An unusual winter record was 1 off East Cape (36°30'S 180°E) on 8 Jul 1998.

I have also made a few sightings in spring during the period of their southern migration: a few distant probables off Taranaki over 11-24 November 1991; 1 heading south well out in the Tasman Sea (42°30' 166°E) on 5 Nov 1997; 3 which spent at least 4 hours well back in our wake as we fished on the Chatham Rise about 44°S 176°30'E on 11 Nov 1998, with a single bird there on 18 Nov 1998; and 1 or 2 birds on 23-24 Nov 1999 on the Chatham Rise about 42°30'S 180°W.

During March 1999, I kept a special watch for this species as we fished about the Snares Shelf and Auckland Islands, with no sightings though we sometimes had up to 500 black-bellied storm petrels in our wake. On 7 April 1999 we moved north to the Canterbury Bight, and 1 Wilson's storm petrel soon appeared back in our wake. Next day about the Mernoo Bank (about 44°S 175°E) I noticed 3 in the wake, then a few more, then 35 or so flying past in 10 minutes, apparently heading eastwards. A westerly gale blew up and at 1500 h I noticed a dense flock of about 800 Wilson's storm petrels feeding about 300 m back in the wake, the numbers diminishing somewhat but many remaining until dusk. On 9 Apr 1999, 100-200 birds were seen, but numbers seemed lower on 10 Apr 1999 until our vessel reversed course and I could see that 500 birds were spread out for about 1 km along the wake. Only about 20 were seen on 11 Apr 1999, then about 5 each day until 14 Apr, with none on 15-16 Apr as we steamed towards Lyttelton. On 9-10 Apr 1999, up to 5 black-bellied and 5 grey-backed storm petrels (*Garrodia nereis*) were feeding with the Wilson's storm petrels, enabling comparisons to be made of plumage, flight, and general "jizz".

These observations show that Wilson's storm petrel do pass through New Zealand waters in significant numbers, at least during their northward migration in some years. Perhaps certain weather conditions brought them closer inshore during April 1990, and it is possible that El Niño weather patterns affect migration routes (Marchant & Higgins 1990). More observations are needed to determine if there are set migration routes or feeding areas, and if these are affected by weather conditions.

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