

LETTER

The Editor
Sir

Kermadec petrels in the Atlantic Ocean

Michael Tove (2005) is wrong that Imber (2004) "stands alone in accepting the British Kermadec petrel (*Pterodroma neglecta*) as correctly identified to species and natural origin". I was asked by the British Ornithologists' Union's British Records Committee (BOU/BRC) to look into petrel records when there was a fashion for rejecting such things in the 1960s, and I found it was correctly identified. It was mounted and dark grey-brown with pale shafts to the primaries and a pale patch at the inner base of the tail. Measurements (in mm) were wing 290+ (tips broken); tail 100+; bill 31; and tarsus 40. It was accompanied by correspondence about stuffing, and T.A. Coward, who helped report it (Newstead & Coward 1908) was one of the best ornithologists of the day. He later wrote "collectors have been defrauded by dealers, for skins obtained abroad have been passed off as British-killed" long before this became accepted (Coward 1927: 230), so he must have been aware of the possibility of fraud. It remained on the British List for over half a century, and I, and Watola (2004), see no reason to doubt it, though it is harder to prove it.

By the time the BOU/BRC came to a conclusion about it, I had long done my job (Bourne 1967), got fed up with this committee, and resigned. It was apparently rejected on the grounds that a bird from the Southern Hemisphere (except of course for large shearwaters and small storm-petrels) could not possibly reach Britain. Similar "reasoning" has since been applied to several sight records and a specimen of Trindade (sic) petrel (*Pterodroma arminjoniana*) (Bourne 1992; Bradshaw 2002) and a sight record of a great frigatebird (*Fregata minor*) (Paterson 1968) presumably also from South Trindade. The justness of this is shown up by the discovery that what was accepted for over half a century as the only magnificent frigate (*F. magnificens*) for Britain was actually an Ascension frigate (*F. aquila*) from the south Atlantic (Walbridge *et al.* 2003). Possibly such birds find their way across the Equator when the SE Trade Winds extend north in the southern winter, and are then blown to Britain in the westerlies the following autumn (Bourne 2004).

So far Mike Imber (2004, 2005) appears to have made an interesting but not yet conclusive case

for the occurrence of Kermadec petrels in the Atlantic, and I suspect Michael Tove (2005) of reluctance to accept that North Americans might make wrong identifications - some of our people may also sometimes have misidentified skuas as gadfly petrels. Surely the only way to settle the matter is a proper investigation of the petrels breeding on South Trindade, including their DNA, and that of the Kermadec petrel, which shows some evidence for hybridisation with Trindade petrels (Bourne & David, 1983, table 2) and are not covered by Brooke & Rowe (1996). It might also be worth checking quite how many species of gadfly petrel breed on the Kermadec Islands, where some odd potential Kermadec/ phoenix (*P. alba*) petrel hybrids have been collected on Raoul Island (Bourne & David 1983).

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