

SHORT NOTE

Salvin's albatross (*Thalassarche salvini*) on Midway Atoll

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Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is renowned for its significant populations of Laysan (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) and black-footed (*P. nigripes*) albatrosses. Their major concentrations occur on Sand Island (28° 12'N, 177° 23'W), where, recently, a single short-tailed or Steller's albatross (*P. albatrus*) has also been a regular resident. About one third of Sand Island is pavement, forming part of an extensive airport that was part of a Naval air station until its closure in 1993. The area was declared a National Refuge and handed over to civilian control in 1997. The US Fish & Wildlife Service maintains a small field station at the island while the airfield remains an emergency landing strip capable of taking the largest of aircraft.

On the morning of 8 April 2003, RM was conducting an airport runway inspection when he observed, and photographed (Figs. 1, 2) an unusual albatross resting on the runway about 150m south of the large water tanks at the centre of the runway complex. A description and photographs were forwarded to CJRR who identified the bird as a sub-adult Salvin's albatross (*Thalassarche salvini*).

With the exception of a very few individuals breeding at the Crozet Islands, Indian Ocean, the breeding sites of Salvin's albatross are solely in the New Zealand zone, at the Bounty Islands and the Western Chain of The Snares (Robertson & van

Tets 1982). The breeding season is from September to April, and though the distribution at sea is poorly known, Spear *et al.* (2003) suggested that the majority of the population migrates across the South Pacific to the coasts of Chile and Peru during the non-breeding season.

Salvin's albatross has previously been considered as a sub-species within the 'shy' albatrosses, but which are now commonly listed as four taxa (*Thalassarche cauta*, *T. steadi*, *T. salvini*, *T. eremita*) (Tickell 2000). They are approximately 50% larger than both Laysan and black-footed albatrosses, and are the largest of the 'mollymawks' (small southern albatrosses), being intermediate in size between the large *Diomedea* and the smaller members of the *Thalassarche*. Cole (2000), in a comprehensive review, found records confirming *T. cauta* and *T. steadi* had occurred in North American waters.

The illustrations of the bird at Sand Island (Figs. 1, 2) show a bird in typical plumage equivalent to that of a sub-adult adult Salvin's albatross, with a pale dove-grey head and neck reaching the leading edge of the wing. The cap is slightly paler.

The bill is the distinctive morphological feature, other than the plumage, for identifying most 'mollymawks' to taxon. In adult Salvin's albatross, the culminicorn and maxillary unguis (nail) is a pale yellow with a slight dark line at the nail where it contacts the mandibular unguis below. The mandibular unguis is brownish-black. The ramicorn (lower mandible) has a pale lemon yellow line along the lower edge with the remainder, plus the latericorn being a greenish grey. The Midway bird shows a poorly-formed pale lemon yellow line on the lower edge of the ramicorn and the remaining side of the bill a muddy brownish-black intermediate between the adult greenish-grey and the dark grey of the juvenile. The maxillary unguis (nail) still shows an extensive area of black, intermediate in the progression from the black of the juvenile to the pale yellow of the adult. These can be compared with a sub-adult Salvin's albatross captured at The Pyramid with similar bill markings (Fig. 3).

The head plumage is too pale and 'capped' for a Chatham albatross (*T. eremita*; Fig. 4). In that taxon the advanced sub-adult bill is a mainly uniform chrome yellow with a dark mandibular unguis,

with some traces of dark remaining in the maxillary unguis as in the Midway bird.

This record is an extension to the known range of Salvin's albatross and an addition to the bird list for the North Pacific. Observers at sea in the North Pacific now have a further challenge to distinguish between three of the four 'shy' albatross complex that have now been recorded in the Northern Pacific.

LITERATURE CITED

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Figure 1 Salvin's albatross resting beside a standing Laysan albatross on runway at Sand Island, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. (photo: R. McCarthy)



Figure 2 Salvin's albatross illustrating the sub-adult features of the bill at Sand Island, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. (photo: R. McCarthy)



Figure 3 Salvin's albatross held in hand to illustrate the sub-adult features of the bill at The Pyramid, Chatham Islands. (photo: C.J.R. Robertson)



Figure 4 Salvin's albatross below a Chatham albatross at The Pyramid, Chatham Islands. (photo: C.J.R. Robertson)