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## SHORT NOTE

### An Oystercatcher in Vanuatu

I was visiting Vanuatu on 29 September 1983, doing conservation work on behalf of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme and the International Council for Bird Preservation, when I was surprised to observe an oystercatcher, a bird not previously recorded for that country.

On the waterfront at Vila, I noticed the characteristic piping calls and saw the bird circling low overhead before it landed on the grassed area by the sea wall opposite the Post Office. It remained on the ground long enough for me to examine it with 8x30 binoculars from about 50 metres before it flew again. The pattern of black and white, both on the ground and in the air, was indistinguishable from that of the South Island Pied Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus finschi*). The white of the breast ended in a sharp line forward of the wing flexure, the lower two-thirds of the back was white and the white wing-bar was prominent. Bill and leg colour appeared to be slightly paler than the deep orange expected on an adult bird, but this feature is difficult to assess on a lone bird.

Appearing particularly agitated, the oystercatcher circled several times and settled very briefly on the flat roof of one of the waterfront buildings before flying across the harbour towards Iririki Island. It was attracting some interest from local people, and those that I spoke to said that they had never seen a "pijin" like that there before.

The origin of this bird is debatable, the two most likely sources being New Zealand and Australia. The Australian Pied Oystercatcher (*H. ostralegus longirostris*) is distributed over much of the coast of that country but is quite sedentary, has a smaller population than the New Zealand subspecies and is found mainly in the southeast (Blakers *et al.* 1984). Moreover, it does not have as much white on the back as was seen on this bird (A. E. Baker, pers. comm.). This feature leads to the conclusion that it was a South Island Pied Oystercatcher.

An extension of range northwards is not surprising, given the dramatic increase in population over the last 30 years (Hay 1983), but 2000 km is further than expected considering the lack of records from intermediate localities. No records have been obtained from either New Caledonia or the Kermadecs, although Schodde *et al.* (1983) reported unidentified pied oystercatchers as occasional non-breeding vagrants on Norfolk Island. The first oystercatchers seen on that island (30 birds in December 1960) may have been South Island ones (Wakelin 1968) and it is probable that more recent records are also of this subspecies. Closer to Australia, on Lord Howe Island, B. D. Heather (pers. comm.) has observed an oystercatcher which was indistinguishable from *H. ostralegus finschi*. This bird was seen on the airport tarmac there on 13 September 1982 after not being there on the two previous days. It remained at least until 17 September.

It is possible, though unproven, that an individual as far out of its range as Vanuatu may be the result of an immature bird on reverse migration, particularly as it and the Lord Howe Island bird were seen at the time of year when birds in New Zealand were migrating south for breeding. The evidence for this phenomenon has been reviewed by Diamond (1982), who concluded that it is relatively common in some species and is a result of "mirror-image" navigational errors, in which a migrating bird takes a correct bearing from a north-south axis but travels on the wrong side of that axis. In other words, a confusion of left and right orientation occurs. In this case the "error" would be a mirror image in relation to the east-west axis but there appears to be no logical objection to that possibility. If oystercatchers begin their navigation by orienting to the coast, a simple left-right error at the start could carry them north instead of south. The lack of such records is not surprising, given the small land area available for them to end up at.

An alternative explanation suggested by Diamond is that some birds migrate in the reverse direction as a result of initially being blown off course while on normal passage. On becoming lost they return along their path to reorientate. In the north of New Zealand, it would be easy for a bird to miss land on the return path and continue north-westwards beyond North Cape. The evidence for this behaviour is meagre, however, and 2000 km is an extreme distance for a bird to fly in order to "reorientate".

Whatever the mechanism whereby oystercatchers arrive so far from their normal range, such records are symptomatic of a burgeoning population and should be monitored to see whether more permanent range extensions result.

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