

Notes

Some mid-XIX Century bird collections from Tristan da Cunha

Neither Hagen (1952) nor Elliott (1957) in their reviews of the ornithology of Tristan da Cunha and other islands of that group mention the small collection of eggs made by Lt Rowland M. Sperling, R.N., while serving on H.M.S. *Raccoon*. Layard (1868) in his November 1868 listing of recent acquisitions by the South African Museum, Cape Town, of which he was then Curator, mentions that Sperling "has brought us some fine sea-birds' eggs from Tristan d'Acunha, including one of the Lesser Eyebrowed Albatross (*Diomedea melanophrys*), and a singularly marked white egg, said to be that of the 'Black Petrel', but we know of no Petrel's egg that is anything but pure white." Sperling (1872) states that he visited the island in September 1868 and goes on to report that "I obtained here the eggs of *Diomedea exulans*, *D. melanophrys* and *Procellaria gigantea*, besides those of several other species, which I was unable to identify." He does not mention obtaining skins on Tristan though he does so at other places and Roland Trimen's 1879 MS Catalogue of Foreign Birds in the South African Museum (c.f. Brooke 1976) does not mention any Sperling specimens from Tristan da Cunha.

Three problems arise from the foregoing : what species were involved; when was the collection made; what happened to it? *Diomedea exulans* was and is the Wandering Albatross and no problem arises since it bred on Tristan da Cunha late into the last century (Hagen 1952). *D. melanophrys* is an unjustified emendation of *D. melanophris*, the Blackbrowed Albatross, which is a non-breeding visitor to Tristan da Cunha (Elliott, 1957) and which was not then fully distinguished from the Yellow-nosed Albatross *D. chlororhynchos* which is a common breeding species in the group, i.e. the so-called *melanophris* eggs were those of the Yellow-nosed Albatross. *Procellaria gigantea* is a giant petrel *Macronectes* sp. and as far north as Tristan it would be the Northern Giant Petrel *M. halli*. A giant petrel was certainly breeding on Tristan at the time of Sperling's visit (Hagen, 1952) when Elephant Seals were still abundant. An egg catalogue in the South African Museum made early this century mentions an egg of the Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis* from Tristan ex Layard. This may have come from Sperling and be one of his unidentified species or from Capt. Een mentioned below.

The "singularly marked white egg" (Layard 1868) was probably that of the flightless Tristan Island Moorhen *Gallinula n. nesiotis*. Of *G. nesiotis* Sperling (1872) remarks that "the solitary wingless land-bird of the island is fast becoming extinct, from the depredations of the wild cats." Greenway (1958) suggests that their terminal diminished population was eliminated by the rats that reached Tristan from a wreck in 1882. Elliott (1957) mentions a specimen dated 1891 from Cape Colony but this may have been a bird held in captivity in South Africa for years before that. Perhaps it was one of "a collection of sea birds' eggs, live specimens of the 'island hen' of Tristan D'Acunha *Nesiotis insularis* (Sclater); and three specimens in alcohol of the 'island thrush', from Captain Een, of the *Telegraph*"; reported by Layard (1869) as received in June 1869. The *Cape of Good Hope Government Gazette* for 18 June 1869 states that the 46 ton

schooner *Telegraph* under the mastership of G.T. Een left Gough Island with a cargo of seal oil on 31 May and reached Cape Town on 16 June. The contradiction on where the *Telegraph* came from is perhaps more apparent than real since it is far easier for a sailing vessel to travel from Tristan to Cape Town via Gough in the westerly wind belt than it is to make the direct crossing north of the westerlies in a belt of uncertain winds.

Sperling (1872) states that he visited Tristan in September 1868. The *Cape of Good Hope Government Gazette* for 22 September 1868 states that H.M.S. *Raccoon* under the command of Capt. R. Purvis R.N. left Tristan on 2 September and reached Simon's Bay Harbour (= Simonstown) on 18 September. Later issues tell us that H.M.S. *Raccoon* visited Table Bay Harbour and that it finally left for St Helena on 6 November. Rowan (1951) found that the first eggs of the Yellow-nosed Albatross were laid "at the end of the first week in September" on Nightingale Island and later on other islands. Egg laying should have started in August 1868 on Tristan to have enabled Sperling to leave with some on 2 September. An alternative possibility is that Sperling obtained blown eggs collected in a previous season and that the time of egg laying was not different in the 1860s and 1940s.

Except for the egg of the Soft-plumaged Petrel mentioned above which may or may not have come from Sperling I can find no evidence that his eggs stayed any length of time in the South African Museum. Perhaps they featured in one of Layard's many exchanges with other museums in all continents.

While dealing with old records from Tristan da Cunha it may be noted that Layard (1867) records an egg of the Wandering Albatross presented by Capt. M.S. Nolloth, in command of H.M.S. *Frolic*, who visited Tristan in March 1856 (Brander, 1940). Layard adds that he himself spent Christmas there 21 years ago, i.e. presumably that of 1845. "I still retain a vivid recollection of the marvellous number of albatrosses of all kinds that we encountered on our arriving in that neighbourhood, and of the thousands that we found sailing about that singular peak, looking at that great altitude (9 800 feet) like mere specks in the sky." But that seems to be all he wrote on Tristan da Cunha. Capt. Nolloth also collected eggs of the Yellow-nosed Albatross there according to an egg catalogue in the South African Museum made early in this century.

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A fish catching technique of the Reed Cormorant

On 16 October 1962 the *Ilala* was berthed at the Chipoka jetty on Lake Malawi, Malawi. I boarded it about noon and stood on the poop looking down into the clear water. There was a Reed Cormorant *Phalacrocorax africanus* fishing around the end of the jetty and the stern of the boat. To dive the cormorant put its head into the water and paddled quickly and vigourously so that it descended into the depths almost at once. It caught a fish once in every five or six dives. The fish were caught by a downward lunge so that the fish's back was nearer the bird's throat and the head and tail stuck out on either side of the bill. On reaching the surface the fish, 5 to 8 cm long, were manipulated until they could be swallowed head first. Gulls are rare on Lake Malawi so Reed Cormorants can bring fish to the surface without much risk that a gull will pirate the catch. The African Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer* which is common on the Lake is also a great pirate but the size of fish taken by the Reed Cormorant is below its size range of interest. Marine cormorants normally swallow captured fish below the surface, presumably to reduce the risk of the prey being pirated by a gull, skua or large tubenose.

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What is the feeding niche of the Kelp Gull in South Africa?

It is not possible to give a full answer to the question "what is the feeding niche of the Kelp Gull in South Africa?" since the necessary detailed studies have yet to be carried out. But published data and our own observations permit the framing of a partial answer which is not the same as that in better studied areas such as New Zealand and Patagonia. Brooke & Cooper (1979) have shown that the Kelp Gull of southern Africa is subspecifically separable from all other populations of this widespread southern hemisphere gull under the name *Larus dominicanus vetula* (Bruch) 1853. The principal character is that in southern Africa adult birds have irises which appear brown to dark brown depending on the number of blackish speckles there are on a pale yellow or off white ground whereas other populations have irises which are variably pale yellow, off white or silvery grey, i.e. they lack the speckling which makes the iris look dark.

In southern Africa the Kelp Gull seldom feeds inland unlike the position in New Zealand where it may occur anywhere except on the mountain tops (Fordham 1963) or Patagonia where it may occur up to 200 km inland (Murphy 1936). In most areas in southern Africa it is seldom seen more than a few metres above the high tide line. Around Saldanha Bay on the west coast they commonly feed up to 3 km inland seeking terrestrial snails and they occasionally move even further inland in this search. It is rare to see even a single bird scavenging in Cape Town outside the harbour though many hundreds of Hartlaub's Gulls *L. hartlaubii* scour the city and nearby suburbs. On the Cape Flats they have bred at Rondevlei (Middlemiss n.d.) and are frequent visitors to that and other fresh water lakes round about as well as the adjacent suburb of Retreat (Winterbottom 1960, 1962). They feed freely on the rubbish tip by the nearby D.F. Malan Airport (W.R. Siegfried pers. comm.). This is 14 km from the nearest part of Table Bay, 11 km from the nearest part of False Bay and 14 km from their well known breeding colony at Swartklip on the False Bay coast. They also breed on islets in lakes near the coast in other parts of the Cape Province (S.A.O.S. nest record cards). Although it is the only regularly occurring gull at Port Elizabeth it does not frequent either municipal rubbish tip (J. Spearpoint *in litt.*). She and B. Every add (*in litt.*) that the gulls are regular visitors in that area to wet habitats up to 23 km from the coast but which are much less than that from the long tidal estuary of the Swartkops River where they breed.

Our colleague, Mr A.J. Williams, suggests that the relative infrequency with which our Kelp Gulls forage inland compared with their practice in New Zealand and Patagonia is partly due to competition with the subtropical continental avifauna which efficiently exploits niches which Kelp Gulls use elsewhere. More particularly, the grassland invertebrate hunting Cattle Egret *Egretta ibis* may preempt the Kelp Gull in making frequent and widespread use of inland habitats. He also points out that South Africa is, in general, an arid land and the moist soil conditions favoured by Kelp Gulls for foraging elsewhere are here highly localised. But we feel that so aggressive a scavenger could certainly forage more freely inland than it does in the presence of small populations of the migratory Yellow billed Kite *Milvus*

migrans parasitus and the resident Pied Crow *Corvus albus*. After all even an apparently healthy adult Hartlaub's Gull can fall victim to a Kelp Gull's attack, not to mention wounded scolopacid waders (Cooper 1977).

Summerhayes *et al.* (1974) state that the Kelp Gull is seldom found at sea more than 5 km from the coast but Sinclair (1978) found them among the regular foragers at fishing trawlers up to 150 km off the coast. There has been no proper study of their feeding habits and preferences in southern Africa. However, we may say that their basic food is bivalve molluscs. *Donax* spp. are obtained by treading in shallow water on a sandy substrate (McLachlan & Liversidge 1978). On rocky shores they scavenge the intertidal zone and thus obtain many dislodged mussels, particularly *Choromytilus meridionalis*, which like *Donax* molluscs, are dropped on hard surfaces to break the shells and allow them access to the flesh (Siegfried 1977). They are regular predators of the eggs and young of all shore and offshore island breeding birds, including their own species (Cooper 1974; Manry 1978; own obs.). We have often found fish bones and scales in casts at roosts but as usual with such evidence we cannot say whether the fish were caught or scavenged by the gulls. We have seen them swimming and feeding on swarming crustacea. They even catch insects in the air swept up in strong updraughts (Summers 1977). Unlike the position in the Falkland Islands and parts of Patagonia (Murphy 1936) they do not trouble lambing sheep on farms in the coastal belt.

Finding food does not seem to be difficult for our Kelp Gulls. It is no rare sight to see very accessible dead fish utterly ignored by them in areas which they are patrolling, apparently for food. In winter they spend only *ca.* four hours a day foraging (Williams 1977).

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Postscript

It is well known that Kelp Gulls will swoop into a disturbed seabird breeding colony to seize unguarded eggs and small chicks. However, they are also attracted to groups of Cape Cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis* who may be disturbed by an approaching human or some other cause. This happens particularly in the afternoon when Cape Cormorants return to roost. Breeding birds may also be attacked at any time of the day. As soon as the cormorants become restless preparatory to taking flight, the Kelp Gulls mob selected individuals and hassle them until they lighten themselves by regurgitating their latest meal. Thereupon the gulls fight furiously among themselves to consume what the cormorants have thrown up. Several cormorants may be involved each time their group is disturbed and the Kelp Gulls behave as if this was a regular part of their foraging technique.

Kelp Gulls catching Crayfish

On two separate occasions we have recorded Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus* catching Crayfish *Jasus lalandii* below low water mark. Although Kelp Gulls have previously been seen to scavenge from washed-up live or dead Crayfish (PS pers.obs.), these observations are apparently the first for the gull actively catching live Crayfish in the sea. Detailed accounts of each incident follow.

On 13 May 1979 approximately half an hour before spring low tide, while watching Kelp Gulls at Bloubergstrand, I saw an adult Kelp Gull plunge into the water approximately 50 m offshore and 100 m from my vantage point. The gull's head remained submerged for a short while and the bird itself seemed to be engaged in a desperate struggle. When this struggle eased, the bird's head came halfway out of the water and it started backpeddling strongly from the rocks where it had made the plunge. Once clear of the kelp which surrounds these rocks, the gull seemed to adjust its grip on the prey and it was at this stage that with the help of X8 binoculars, I could see that the gull had taken a Crayfish of appreciable size.

The gull then took flight and with obvious difficulty in flying, brought its prey to within 30 m of me. From estimating in comparison to the bird's tarsus, the Crayfish's carapace seemed almost twice this length. Once on the beach, the gull set about taking off and devouring the Crayfish's legs. After this operation, the Crayfish (still alive) was turned on its back and the softer underbelly was then taken out. It also seemed, although this cannot be stated with certainty, that the carapace appeared particularly soft, since the gull later also took this apart and ate it. Throughout the entire performance, the adult gull was attended by two very excited and loudly crying juvenile Kelp Gulls (PS).

At dusk on 21 July 1979 at Kommetjie, an adult Kelp Gull was seen flying from the offshore kelp beds to the beach, where it dropped an object it had been carrying in its beak. Its catch proved to be a live Crayfish with a carapace length of 61 mm. We found many nematodes on the underside of the tail of the Crayfish, suggesting that the animal was not healthy, and possibly less able to avoid a predator. It has also been reported to us by crayfishermen that gulls (presumably Kelp Gulls) devoured the tails of live, large crayfish (carapaces greater than 89 mm) left unguarded on the beach (AB & DGM).

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Underwater swimming by albatrosses

G.H. Nicholls (1979, *Cormorant* 6: 38) describes underwater swimming by albatrosses. There is in fact an earlier record in respect of the Blackbrowed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris* which appeared as a short note in *Lammergeyer* 12: 79-80 (Ogram 1970). Since this journal is probably not readily accessible to the majority of *Cormorant* readers, the note, entitled "Shades of the Ancient Mariner" is copied below in its entirety with the permission of the Editor of *Lammergeyer*.

"On the afternoon of the 14th August 1970 I was fishing at sea from a ski-boat with two companions. We were some two miles off the Zululand coast, opposite Mapelane, approximately 28°25'S 32°27'E, when we were joined by an adult albatross.

The bird, which seemed quite fearless, rode the swell in close proximity to our craft and persistently took the small shad and sardine bait we were using. When it first joined us the bird went down to a depth of about 15 feet to collect its first meal of sardine bait. Having consumed this it went down and collected one of our shad. The thieving continued even when we put our bait overboard as close as possible to the side of the boat. Eventually we became so exasperated with this albatross's interference with our sport that by throwing lines over it we caught it, drew it inboard, and shut it up in the boat's hatch.

Later in the afternoon when we had done our fishing we released the bird, which seemed in no way put out and for some time still refused to leave us. The fact that the bird was handled, as well as stayed with us for some hours, made it possible to be quite sure of the identification."

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Third census of the Damara Tern at Elizabeth Bay,
South West Africa, December 1978

The Damara Tern *Sterna balaenarum* has previously been recorded breeding at Elizabeth Bay (26 55S, 15 12E) in 1976 and 1977 (Frost & Johnson 1977, Siegfried & Johnson 1977). This note details observations made during 8 - 10 December 1978.

A total of 13 nests, all containing one egg, was found. Another four birds seen on the ground may have been incubating. No young birds were seen. Up to 15 birds were seen and photographed feeding in the bay. Breeding birds were not seen at the previously recorded site among barchan dunes, but two birds were seen flying in the vicinity. Eight birds on the ground, at least four on eggs, were seen among barchan dunes at a new locality. A further eight nests were among gravel humps and one was on a salt pan. Birds were not seen at these sites in previous years. Previous estimates of the colony size were 12 - 15 pairs in 1976 and 20 pairs in 1977 (Frost & Johnson 1977, Siegfried & Johnson 1977). Colony size in 1978 is estimated at 15 - 20 pairs. It would seem that colony size has remained relatively stable over the three years censused.

At one nest site, the incubating bird was exposed to drifting sand due to a strong wind during the evening and night of 8 December. The bird was observed during the evening to adjust its egg several times and it appeared 'disturbed' by the wind blown sand. On the following morning the nest site was visited, and the bird was still sitting. On disturbance the bird flew up and returned to the site four times without settling. Closer inspection showed an absence of nest scrape and egg. The egg was then found buried under *ca.* 10 cm of sand. The egg was cold and contained a well-formed embryo. It would seem that the bird had acted as a windbreak and sand had piled up in front of it. As it stood up to move the egg, the sand had apparently gradually covered the egg. Frost & Johnson (1977) point out the necessity of the Damara Tern nesting in unexposed sites with a sandy substrate - a view confirmed by the above observation.

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Yellowbilled Duck at sea

Instances of wildfowl other than the Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus* occurring at sea in southern Africa are rare (Cooper, 1977, *Cormorant* 2: 24, Baron 1977, *Cormorant* 3: 19). PRH noted two Yellowbilled Duck *Anas undulata* in the sea at the Cape Recife Nature Reserve (33 43S, 25 42E), Port Elizabeth, on 19 November 1977. The birds were ca. 40 metres from the shore and near the Cape Recife Sewage Works which has a large population of wildfowl, including *A. undulata*.

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Giant Petrels feeding on 14 month-old whale carcasses

A pod of 14 Sperm Whales *Physeter catodon* was stranded on Elephant Beach, East Falkland in October 1977. This beach, which is four kilometres long, lies to the north of East Falkland and is flanked by the long rocky coast of Cape Dolphin to the north and the mainland coast to the west. Therefore the beach lies at the apex of a giant funnel and regularly traps whales. Skulls of 101 Blackfish *Globicephala* sp. were counted on approximately one-third of the length of this beach.

I visited the area on 29 December 1978, and the remains of the Sperm Whales were half buried in the sand. Much of the flesh had gone, leaving a grotesque assemblage of skulls, jaw bones and vertebrae sticking out of the sand. However on parts of some of the whales blubber and skin still adhered and I counted 58 Giant Petrels *Macroneoctes giganteus* around the head of one whale where they were ripping at the blubber. The flesh by this time was 14 months old. It was likely that this food supply would have lasted for several more months.

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