FIRST CONFIRMED AFRICAN RECORD OF TAHITI PETREL *PSEUDOBULWERIA ROSTRATA*

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ABSTRACT

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A Tahiti Petrel *Pseudobulweria rostrata* was observed and photographed 33 km offshore of Durban, South Africa (at 30.040°S, 31.346°E), on 11 November 2018. The only other reports of this species in Africa or the western Indian Ocean are unconfirmed and are from off southern Mozambique, dated November 1987 and December 1990. We believe that the size of the Durban bird distinguishes it from the very similar but smaller Beck's Petrel *P. becki*.

Key words: Africa, distribution, *Pseudobulweria rostrata*, South Africa, Tahiti Petrel

Lambert (2004) reported five sightings of Tahiti Petrels *Pseudobulweria rostrata*, all made from commercial prawn trawlers at sea off southern Mozambique. Three of these sightings occurred 07–17 November 1987, and all three were singletons, leading Lambert to surmise that they were of the same individual. The other two sightings occurred 12–14 December 1990; one sighting was of a singleton and the other was of two birds together. All five sightings were made 45–110 km offshore, east-northeast of Maputo. These records would be the first for the western Indian Ocean and Africa, but Lambert conceded that confirmation with photographic or specimen evidence would be desirable. Lambert's records have subsequently been viewed as unconfirmed, expressly not accepted or ignored by all leading avian handbooks and field guides covering southern Africa (Hockey *et al.* 2005, Newman 2010, Sinclair *et al.* 2011, Chittenden *et al.* 2016, Ryan 2017).

On 11 November 2018 we were on a pelagic day trip about 33 km off Durban, South Africa (30.040°S, 31.346°E). The weather was warm, with largely clear skies and a light breeze from the southeast. Depth was ~ 500 m, and the ocean surface was slightly choppy. Our boat was stationary at a chum slick composed of chunked and grated sardines and sharks' livers, anchovy oil, and water, all of which had been mixed together and frozen in 20 L buckets (see Shirihai 2008). The chum attracted varying numbers of Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus,* European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, Shy Albatross *Thalassarche cauta,* Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche carteri*, Great-winged Petrel *Pterodroma macroptera*, White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctalis*, Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*, Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*, and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*.

At 09h10 an unusual procellariiform seabird flew towards the boat low over the water from downwind of the chum. Without landing, the bird turned in flight a few times as it passed low over the slick before disappearing towards the east. It was visible for less than two minutes, but the light was excellent with full sun on the bird. It came as close as ~ 100 m from us, allowing several reasonable photos of which four are reproduced here (Fig. 1).

The following description is based on both our observations of the bird and our photos. Viewed from below, the entire head and upper breast were uniformly blackish-brown. There was no hint of white or other paleness on the throat, around the base of the bill, or anywhere on the head. The bill was strikingly long, deep, and bulky, and it was all black in colour. The eye was dark and appeared to be quite large. The lower breast, flanks and belly to the vent, and undertail-coverts were unmarked white. The legs and feet were not visible, but some photos indicate a hint of flesh-coloured toes protruding through the feathering that covered them. The underwing was largely blackish-brown. The remiges and greater coverts were slightly paler than the remaining underwing-coverts. There was no pale or whitish band along the inner leading edge of the wing, nor were any other pale patches evident in the underwing.

The photos (including Fig. 1) showed that the outermost primary was old; it had a bleached white shaft and may have been pointed in shape, suggesting that it was a juvenile feather (R.L. Flood and S.N.G. Howell, pers. comm.). The adjacent primary appeared to be growing, which agrees with the moult schedule of Tahiti Petrels visiting waters off Middle America (Howell 2012).

Seen in flight from above, the entire upperbody and upperwings were uniformly blackish-brown. The uppertail-coverts and perhaps the upper surface of the tail were marginally paler than the remaining upperparts plumage.

In structure, both the neck and, particularly, the rear end of the bird appeared elongated. The head was relatively small, unlike the "bull-headed" appearance of some *Pterodroma* petrels, but the bill was disproportionately bulky (both long and deep)—strikingly so. The wings were long and narrow, and they were held directly out from the body, unlike in *Pterodroma* species, where the wings are

typically strongly angled forward in the inner wing. The tail was shortish, broad, and rounded at the tip. In terms of flight action, the flight of the bird was not dynamic and lacked the high, swooping flight characteristic of *Pterodroma* petrels, but there was only a light breeze at the time. At all times the bird remained close or fairly close to the ocean surface, and the wings were mainly held in a shallow M-shaped profile, as viewed from head-/rear-on.

Based on the plumage and other information provided by Onley & Scofield (2007), the bird could be one of only two species: Tahiti Petrel or Beck's Petrel *Pseudobulweria becki*. These two species are essentially identical in plumage and are best told apart by size (Shirihai 2008). Beck's Petrel is smaller than Tahiti Petrel by 15 % in wing and tail measurements and by 25 % in bill and tarsus lengths; taken together, Beck's Petrel appears 10 % to 20 % smaller in the field (Shirihai 2008). The bill of Beck's Petrel is not as relatively long as in Tahiti Petrel. Shirihai *et al.* (2014) presented a side-by-side photo of Tahiti and Beck's Petrel study skins, clearly showing relative size differences. With experience, the two species can be differentiated by flight action (Flood *et al.* 2017), specifically in strong winds, with the smaller Beck's Petrel showing a "distinctly more rapid and shorter flight action during arcing wind-assisted flight" than the larger Tahiti Petrel (Bird *et al.* 2014). However, our bird was seen only relatively briefly and under conditions of light wind.

Comparing the size of our bird to that of local species, we judged our bird to be closer to Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma baraui* (38–40 cm) and Great-winged Petrel (38–42 cm), which are similar to Tahiti Petrel (38–42 cm), than to Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis* (32–37 cm) and Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni* (28–32 cm), which are more like Beck's Petrel (29–34 cm). (All body lengths are based on Hockey *et al.* 2005, Onley & Scofield 2007, and Howell & Zufelt in press). The particularly prominent bill of our bird may also be consistent with Tahiti Petrel rather than Beck's Petrel, although the

Fig. 1. Photos of a Tahiti Petrel, taken on 11 November 2018, 33 km offshore of Durban, South Africa (photos by D.G. Allan and N.D. Perrins).

value of this single feature is questionable for identifications based on observations and photos from the field (S.N.G. Howell, pers. comm.).

Concerning relative distribution and abundance, Tahiti Petrel is known to breed broadly across the tropical South Pacific, ranging eastwards to the Americas and westwards to the Indian Ocean around Australia and Indonesia; total population size is 20 000–30 000 mature individuals (BirdLife International 2018a). Observations from the Americas are recorded mainly from May to November (Howell 2012), which corresponds with our record and possibly with when the species is most likely to be distant from the breeding grounds. The timing of breeding, however, is poorly known and appears to vary geographically. Tahiti Petrels occur year-round in the eastern Indian Ocean off Australia (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). By contrast, Beck's Petrel is known only in an area off the east coast of Papua New Guinea, mainly around New Ireland (Bird *et al.* 2014, Flood *et al.* 2017). The total population is conservatively estimated at 50–249 mature individuals, although it is likely larger (BirdLife International 2018b).

Both of us have extensive local experience with pelagic birds (more than 200 pelagic day trips between us), but neither has previous field experience with *Pseudobulweria* petrels, which are not regularly observed in southern African waters. Nevertheless, we are confident that we saw and photographed a Tahiti Petrel. Interestingly, the date of our record (November) fits well with that of Lambert's sightings (November–December), although his records present no details that allow differentiation from Beck's Petrel. November–December may prove to be the season of (irregular?) occurrence of Tahiti Petrels in the western Indian Ocean.

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