

## Short communications

### Blacksmith Plover *Vanellus armatus* on Prince Edward Island, Southern Ocean

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During an ornithological survey of Prince Edward Island (46°38'S 37°45'E) (Crawford *et al.* in prep.), we encountered an adult Blacksmith Plover *Vanellus armatus* on 19 December 2001 in Albatross Valley (Figs 1 and 2). It was first heard calling and foraging among short grass, but took flight on our approach when it was harassed by Subantarctic Skuas *Catheracta antarctica*. It was therefore unexpected when we encountered what must have been the same bird again two days later at R.S.A. Point, about 1 km distant from the place where it was first seen. Prince Edward Island, along with the nearby Marion Island, is *c.* 1,800 km from the closest point on the African continent, Port Elizabeth (Fig. 1).

This is the first record of Blacksmith Plover for the Prince Edward Island group (Newton *et al.* 1983, B.M. Dyer *in litt.*), and the third record for southern hemisphere islands in the African sector of the Atlantic, Indian and Southern Oceans. An immature was seen on Europa Island, in the southern Mozambique Channel (Fig. 1), from 27 to 29 May 1994 (Le

Corre & Probst 1997). Europa Island is 530 km from continental Africa. Another, age not specified, was recorded on Possession Island in the Crozet Archipelago from 22 August to 3 November 1982 (Stahl *et al.* 1984).

Blacksmith Plovers occur in sub-Saharan Africa south of a line between Kenya and Angola (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). During the first half of the 20th century, the range expanded southwestwards by about 1,000 km towards the Western Cape (Ward *et al.* 1997). The farthest known movement of a ringed bird is 131 km (Underhill *et al.* 1999), but this does not reflect the extent to which Blacksmith Plovers normally move because they exploit ephemeral habitats. Their preferred habitat is moist, short grassland and mudflats on the edges of waterbodies; the availability of this habitat is seasonal and rainfall-dependent, especially in the middle of its range. In Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana, Tree (1980, 1998) and Ward *et al.* (1997) showed that numbers of Blacksmith Plovers fluctuate widely according to habitat availabil-

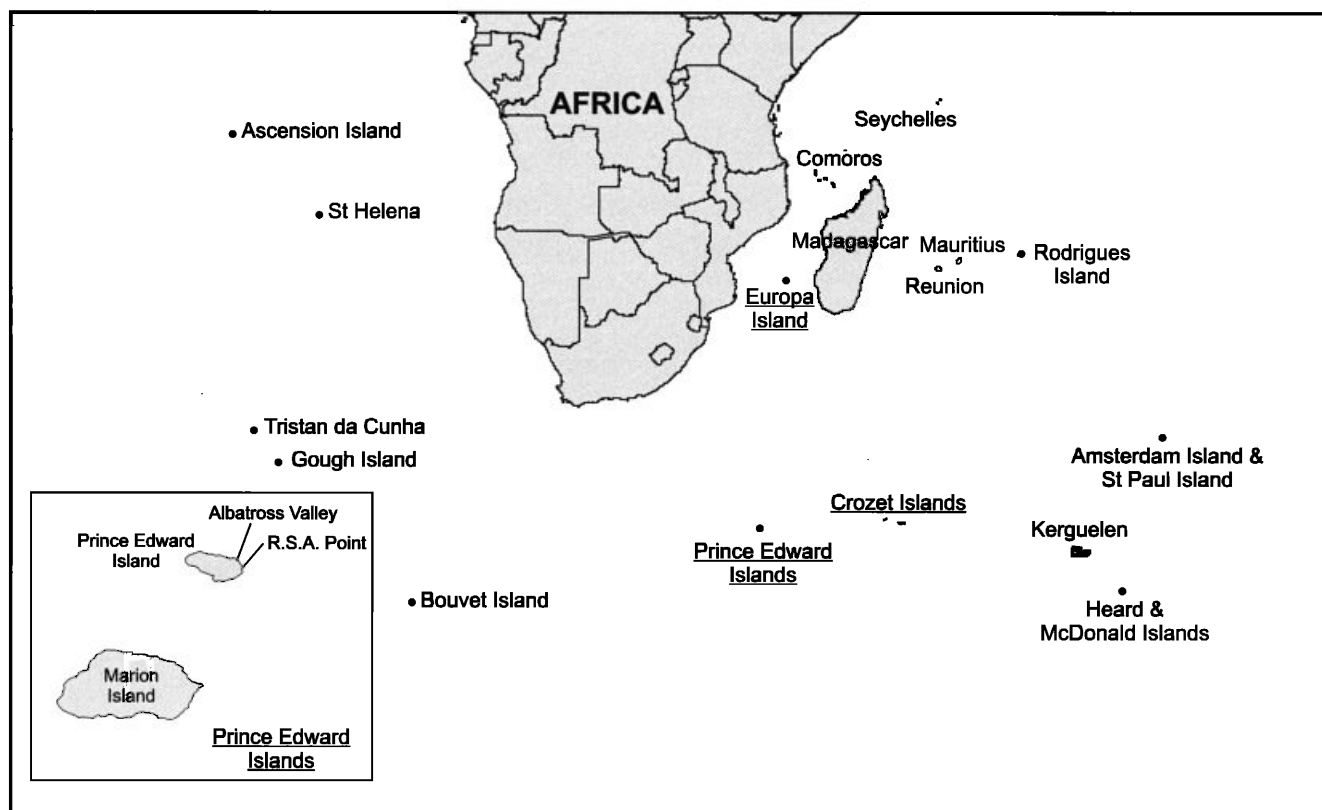


Fig. 1. The African sector of the Southern Ocean; the three islands at which Blacksmith Plovers have been recorded are underlined.





**Fig. 2.** Adult Blacksmith Plover in Albatross Valley on Prince Edward Island; the bird in the foreground is a Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* chick.

ity in response to rainfall events over broad areas, and they must therefore undertake substantial nomadic movements. In southern Mozambique, Parker (1999) showed that Blacksmith Plovers have a strong seasonal occurrence pattern. They are most abundant in the driest months, July to September, which suggests that they leave this region once the rains begin.

There is evidence that Blacksmith Plovers prepare for these nomadic movements by acquiring fuel stores. The average mass of Blacksmith Plovers is 158 g (Maclean 1993). Birds weighing in excess of 200 g have been found, and the maximum recorded is 226 g (Summers & Waltner 1979). In describing these heavy birds, Tree (1998) said: "The accumulated lipids on the breast were very obvious to the feel". Fuel reserves exceeding 30% of average mass would be sufficient to enable a Blacksmith Plover that had been blown over the ocean by a weather system to stay aloft for at least 41 hours (Summers & Waltner 1979). At 50 km/hour, a plover could cover more than 2,000 km in that time.

Therefore, given that Blacksmith Plovers acquire sufficient fuel to undertake extensive movements within southern Africa, and given that these movements must have a large nomadic component because they are searching for ephemeral habitats, it is not surprising that they occasionally occur as vagrants on the offshore islands of the oceans adjacent to their continental range.

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