

NOTES

LEUCISTIC BLACK-VENTED SHEARWATERS (*PUFFINUS OPISTHOMELAS*) IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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In his account of the biology of the Black-vented Shearwater (*Puffinus opisthomelas*), Everett (1988) mentioned that "leucism and partial albinism . . . are so far unrecorded for *opisthomelas*." Such plumage aberrations are widely recorded among birds, including, among procellariids, Sooty Shearwaters (*P. griseus*; Palmer 1962, Stallcup 1976) and a Greater Shearwater (*P. gravis*) off New England (Vickery 1978). Within the *Puffinus puffinus* complex, leucism has been documented for *P. p. mauretanicus* (Mackrill and Yesou 1988, Elkins 1990) and *P. p. puffinus* (Flumm 1990). This note presents photographic documentation of two leucistic Black-vented Shearwaters and briefly discusses implications for field identification of shearwaters. Leucism is used here in the sense of Buckley (1982) to signify a reduction or local absence of pigment short of albinism (the complete lack of pigment).

On 14 January 1984 Arthur L. Howe observed and photographed an odd shearwater from the vessel *Sharpshooter* in Santa Monica Bay, Los Angeles Co., California. Because the bird was with a large group of Black-vented Shearwaters and identical to them in size, shape, and style of flight, he tentatively identified the bird as a Black-vented Shearwater. The one photograph he obtained (Figure 1) confirms this identification.

In the field the bird showed diluted pigmentation on the head and neck, being essentially white-headed with a pale brown crown and pale brown and white mottling on the hindneck. The Black-vented Shearwater's crown color is normally "dark brown" (Palmer 1962, Harrison 1983). The white of the face, throat, and auricular area extended well back to the sides of the neck. The general dorsal plumage color was that of typical *P. opisthomelas*, though somewhat paler; the extent to which plumage wear might have contributed to the paler dorsum is uncertain. The undertail coverts appeared dusky, as is typical of this species. Another *opisthomelas* in similar plumage was observed in Santa Monica Bay in January 1988 (Howe pers. comm.).

On 7 March 1987 Jonathan K. Alderfer observed and photographed a Black-vented Shearwater in the San Pedro Channel, Los Angeles Co., with extensive white in the primaries, secondaries, uppertail coverts, undertail coverts, and hindneck (Figures 2-4). This individual also showed white mottling on the crown. Like the bird photographed by Howe, this bird was observed with normally plumaged Black-vented Shearwaters and was identical in size and shape (Figure 4). The extensive white in the wings was very evident in flight (Figures 2-3). An apparent *P. opisthomelas* showing large white wing patches was noted by Howe (pers. comm.) in Santa Monica Bay in November 1988; it was not photographed.

Leucism and other plumage anomalies in seabirds have obvious implications for field identification since species diagnosis at sea relies heavily on general plumage pattern and coloration (along with flight style and shape) rather than the details of structure and plumage. Leucism in Sooty Shearwaters has likely given rise to some claims

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Figure 1. Leucistic Black-vented Shearwater in Santa Monica Bay, Los Angeles County, California, on 14 January 1984.

Photo by Arthur L. Howe



Figure 2. Boldly pied flight pattern of leucistic Black-vented Shearwater in San Pedro Channel, Los Angeles County, on 7 March 1987.

Photo by Jonathan K. Alderfer

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Figure 3. Same leucistic Black-vented Shearwater in San Pedro Channel, Los Angeles County, 7 March 1987.

Photo by Jonathan K. Alderfer

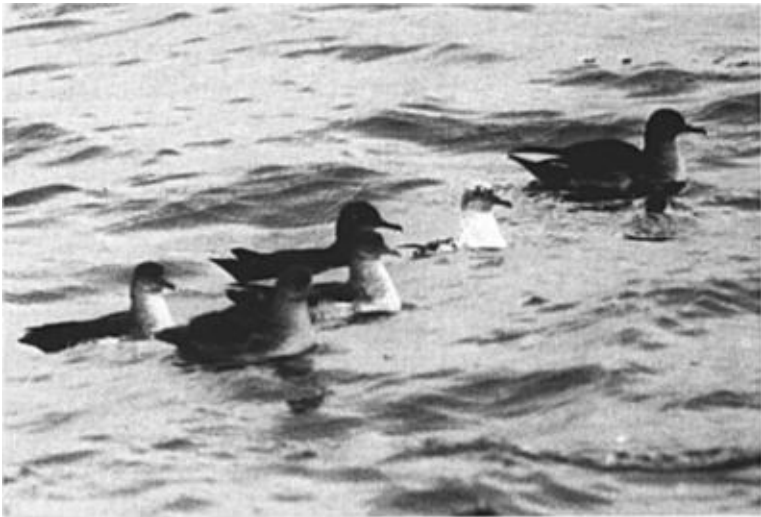


Figure 4. Same leucistic Black-vented Shearwater on the water with typically plumaged conspecifics.

Photo by Jonathan K. Alderfer

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of the Cape Petrel (*Daption capense*) in the northern Pacific Ocean (files of California Bird Records Committee)

The abnormal Black-vented Shearwater in Figure 1 bore a superficial resemblance in plumage to the Streaked Shearwater (*Calonectris leucomelas*), a vagrant to California waters with three records accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (Morlan 1985). However, the size, structure, and flight of the Santa Monica Bay bird convincingly rule out the much larger *Calonectris*, with its languid flight. Inexperienced observers all too often base field identifications on single field marks (Garrett 1986) while ignoring a suite of other characters that suggest a more sensible identification. In this case a largely whitish head might have suggested *C. leucomelas*. The bird photographed by Alderfer (Figures 2-4) showed a striking wing pattern suggesting that of a Cape Petrel and could conceivably have been mistaken for that species. Field identification problems within the *Puffinus puffinus* complex (including *opisthomelas*) are well-known (Everett 1988, Harrison 1983, Jehl 1982, Morlan 1985); observers should be aware of the potential confusion generated by plumage aberrations.

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