

THE SHORT TALE OF A MELANISTIC BLACK-VENTED SHEARWATER

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At the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ), University of California, Berkeley, I re-examined a controversial specimen of a dark-plumaged shearwater, collected on 19 December 1910 in Monterey Bay by Rollo Beck (MVZ specimen number 18691). Beck was evidently puzzled by this bird and tentatively identified it as a Christmas Shearwater (*Puffinus nativitatis*). Loomis (1918:116) described the specimen, presented its measurements, featured a photo of it, and carefully re-identified it as a Black-vented Shearwater (*P. opisthomelas*) representing “a peculiarly significant example of melanism.” Notwithstanding this, Everett (1988:97) asserted that the specimen “is actually a typical Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) ... The reason Loomis re-identified the specimen as *opisthomelas* is unknown.” The bird was labeled as a Short-tailed Shearwater when I examined it at the MVZ on 1 February 2007, but it is not recorded who identified it as such (C. Cicero pers. comm.). Everett, unlike Loomis, offered no rationale for his opinion.

On first glance, the bird does look rather like the Short-tailed Shearwaters among which it had been laid, but its forehead is more sloping (the anterior end of the skull is intact, enabling evaluation of this feature), its bill longer, and its underwing coverts are solidly dark. As noted by Loomis (1918), its measurements are typical of a Black-vented Shearwater and serve to eliminate the Short-tailed and Christmas shearwaters. From Loomis (1918), measurements of 103 specimens of the Black-vented Shearwater: wing chord 234–254 mm (264–290 mm in 44 specimens of the Short-tailed), tail 71–84 mm (77–90 mm in the Short-tailed), exposed culmen 33.3–39.5 mm (29.7–35 mm in the Short-tailed), and tarsus 39.4–45.9 mm (44.3–51 mm in the Short-tailed). Loomis (1918) gave the measurements of MVZ 18961 as follows (my measurements in parentheses): wing “about” 240 mm (235 mm, see below), tail 75 mm, culmen 37.2 mm (37.0 mm), and tarsus 45 mm (45.5 mm). The bird is completing wing molt (the outermost primary, p10, falls 35 mm short of the tip of p9). When p10 is full grown, its tip exceeds p9 by about 5 mm in the Black-vented and 5–10 mm in the Short-tailed, implying a wing chord of 240–245 mm if the feather were fully grown. The specimen’s measurements thus conform to a Black-vented Shearwater; its wing and tail are too short for a Short-tailed, and its bill is too long. The throat and underparts are sooty gray, like those of a Short-tailed Shearwater, but the axillars and underwing coverts appear to be darker gray than typical of a Short-tailed. The photo of this bird in Loomis (1918) is the basis for the statement by Howell and Webb (1995) that the Black-vented Shearwater has the “underbody rarely entirely dusky,” which was not intended to imply that the species manifests a continuum in underpart tone from light to dark; the latter authors failed to appreciate the singular example of melanism that this specimen represents.

I agree with Loomis (1918) that this odd specimen is a Black-vented Shearwater and find Everett’s (1988) comments to have no basis. If such a bird were to be seen at sea, it would prove puzzling. Indeed the hurried flight of a Black-vented is rather different from the “snappier” and more buoyant flight of a Short-tailed, and this probably misled Beck into wondering if MVZ 18691 might be a Christmas Shearwater. In comparison to the melanistic Black-vented, a Christmas Shearwater in life is darker and more uniformly chocolate brown overall with a longer tail, a steeper forehead, and a shorter, blackish bill (Figures 1 and 2; the bill of a Black-vented in life is paler and grayish overall). The flight of a Christmas Shearwater also tends to be less hurried than that of a Black-vented. This bird highlights the problems posed by atypical individuals and the value of specimens permanently archived. I thank Carla Cicero at

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Figure 1. Black-vented Shearwater off Puerto Angel, Oaxaca, Mexico, on 8 March 2007. Note the relatively long, overall grayish bill and the sloping forehead.

Photo by Steve N. G. Howell



Figure 2. Christmas Shearwater off Puerto Angel, Oaxaca, Mexico, on 8 March 2007. Note the relatively short, black bill accentuated by the relatively steep forehead.

Photo by Steve N. G. Howell

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the MVZ for access to that collection and for help in checking this bird's history, and I thank Kimball Garrett for review of this note.

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