

DOES THE TAHITI PETREL *PSEUDOBULWERIA ROSTRATA* VISIT THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN?

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From 1980 to 1990 I spent approximately 350 days, spread over most months of the year, off the coast of Mozambique conducting shrimp-fishery research. On five occasions I observed predominantly brown and white, medium-sized gadfly petrels that were unfamiliar to me. The birds were seen 45–110 km offshore over the southeastern shelf-break of Delagoa Bay, southern Mozambique, within the Exclusive Economic Zone of that country (Table 1). The three sightings in November 1987 may have been of the same individual, but in December 1990 at least two birds were present.

Typically, the birds circled slowly around the vessel for hours at distances as close as 50 m. I thus had the opportunity to study plumage and flight behaviour in detail. The birds did not follow the vessels directly, nor did they feed on discarded trawler offal. On one occasion a bird sat down briefly far astern of the ship and appeared to be pecking at the sea surface.

Immediately after the sightings I sketched and noted plumage and behaviour. According to my detailed diary notes, diagnostic features are as follows: A medium-sized, long-winged gadfly petrel with a slender neck and head; bill black or blackish, not thin. The legs and feet were not clearly seen. Head and neck wholly dark brown, no white or pale feathers at chin or throat, sharp break against the white belly; other underparts white including the undertail coverts (unlike the Atlantic Petrel *Pterodroma incerta*). The dark tail feathers formed a narrow dark border around the undertail coverts. Back and upper wings were entirely brown, matching the head. A narrow pale longitudinal stripe was present in the centre of the underwing in the region of the bases of the primaries and secondaries. No white flash was present in the wings, as seen in the Trinidad or Round Island Petrel *P. arminjoniana*.

Most conspicuous was the flight behaviour, seen mostly in calm seas. Flight was slow and gliding, languid and never hasty, quite unlike the manoeuvrable flight of other gadfly petrels, being more similar to that of Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*. The birds were observed to fly only low over the sea, moving between the swells; they did not rise up into the air above the wave tops as do *Pterodroma* petrels to varying degrees. The wings were kept slightly arched downwards.

Consulting the field guides I then had on board (Tuck & Heinzel 1978, Harrison 1985), I found that only three gadfly petrels have plumages similar to that of the birds I observed: Tahiti Petrel *Pseudobulweria rostrata*, Phoenix Petrel *Pterodroma alba* and Magenta Petrel *P. magentae*—all species of the Pacific Ocean.

Once home I consulted a number of references and concluded that only the Tahiti Petrel has all the characteristics of the birds seen. I found full agreement concerning body shape, plumage pattern and flight behaviour (Bourne 1964, Bechter *et al.* 1986, Marchant & Higgins 1990, Doughty *et al.* 1999, Kennedy *et al.* 2000). The features that distinguish Tahiti Petrel from Phoenix and Magenta Petrels coincided in all cases with the descriptions I made (Bechter *et al.* 1986, Marchant & Higgins 1990, Colston *et al.* 1997).

Two subspecies of the Tahiti Petrel breed in the central and western Pacific Ocean south of the equator: *P. r. rostrata* on the Society and Marquesas Islands and *P. r. trouessarti* in New Caledonia (Bretagnolle *et al.* 1998, Brooke 2004). A rarely recorded and smaller third subspecies *P. r. becki* may breed in the Bismarck Archipelago and on the Solomon Islands (Marchant & Higgins 1990, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). It has been accorded specific status by BirdLife International (2004) and Brooke (2004).

In the Pacific Ocean, dispersion and migration of the Tahiti Petrel probably take place in a wide range around the breeding islands, although records from Taiwan, the Philippines, eastern Australia, Mexico and Peru exist (Marchant & Higgins 1990, Kennedy *et al.* 2000). There are Indian Ocean records from the West Australian continental shelf and from eastern Indonesia, where the species is reported from Halmahara, Seram and Banda Sea and from southeast of Timor (Marchant & Higgins 1990, Coates & Bishop 1997). Hitherto, no other records have been reported from the Indian Ocean west of the above regions.

My sightings of what are considered to be Tahiti Petrels are the first for the western Indian Ocean. If they can be confirmed by photographic evidence or by a specimen, then the species should be regarded as a rare vagrant to southern African waters (P.G. Ryan *in litt.*).

TABLE 1
Sightings of presumed Tahiti Petrels *Pseudobulweria rostrata* at sea off the coast of southern Mozambique

Date	Birds seen (n)	Position	Distance offshore (km)
07 November 1987	1	25°53'S, 33°49'E	80
14 November 1987	1	25°48'S, 34°36'E	102
17 November 1987	1	25°51'S, 34°44'E	108
12 December 1990	2	25°49'S, 34°50'E	110
14 December 1990	1	25°42'S, 33°24'E	45

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