OUT-OF-RANGE SIGHTING OF A SOUTH GEORGIAN DIVING PETREL *PELECANOIDES GEORGICUS* IN THE SOUTHEAST ATLANTIC OCEAN

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Received 21 August 2016; accepted 29 October 2016

ABSTRACT

ROLLINSON, D.P., CARDWELL, P., DE BLOCQ, A. & NICOLAU, J.R. 2017. Out-of-range sighting of a South Georgian Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides georgicus* in the southeast Atlantic Ocean. *Marine Ornithology* 45: 21–22.

Because of the difficulties of at-sea identification of diving-petrels, little is known about the distribution of *Pelecanoides* species away from their breeding islands. Here we report an individual that collided with a vessel in the southeast Atlantic Ocean. The species could be confirmed by detailed examination of the bill and nostrils. This record represents a considerable range extension of South Georgian Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides georgicus* and the farthest from its breeding islands to be confirmed. It suggests that diving-petrels disperse farther from breeding islands than previously known.

Key words: vagrant, at-sea identification, breeding islands, South Georgian Diving Petrel

On the morning of 25 July 2016, a single South Georgian Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides georgicus* was found on one of the upper decks of the *SA Agulhas II*. The bird was injured and soon died. It appeared to have collided with the ship during the night, probably attracted to light from the vessel, at approximately 44°S, 07°E (Fig. 1).

At-sea identification of diving-petrels is notoriously difficult, but close inspection of a bird in the hand can allow species-level identification. The bird was identified as a South Georgian Diving Petrel by examination of the nostrils, which revealed that the septal process was located in the middle of the nostril openings (Fig. 2a), in contrast to the septal process being located towards the rear of the nostril openings, as in Common Diving Petrels *P. urinatrix* (Harrison 1983). The underside of the bill was broad-based, converging gradually in a pointed "Gothic" arch to tip (Fig. 2b), consistent with South Georgian Diving Petrel (Harrison 1983). The specimen was not preserved.

Little is known of the at-sea distribution of South Georgian Diving Petrels, with most records being from nearby known breeding islands. A better understanding of the at-sea distribution of diving-petrels is hampered by the extreme difficulty of species identification at sea. This record thus represents a considerable

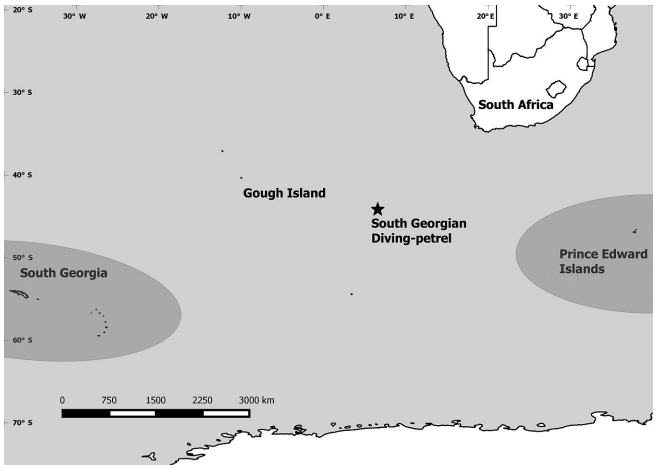

Fig. 1. Location of the South Georgian Diving Petrel collected on 25 July 2016 with the known distribution of from the species in the vicinity of South Georgia and Prince Edward islands indicated in shaded grey (from Onley & Scofield 2007, Shirihai 2007).

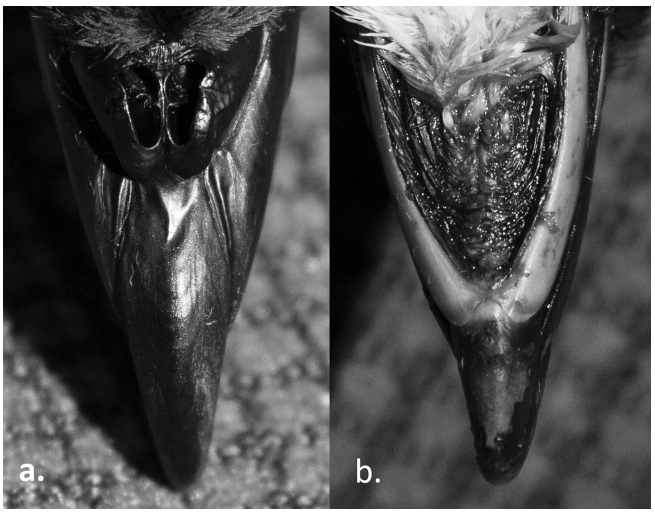

Fig. 2. South Georgian Diving Petrel showing (a) the position of the septal process in the middle of the nostril openings and (b) underside of the bill, displaying the broad base converging gradually in a pointed "Gothic" arch at the tip (Photos D. Rollinson).

range extension for South Georgian Diving Petrel, with the closest known breeding islands found approximately 2 300 km (Prince Edward islands) and 3 300 km away (South Georgia). South Georgian Diving Petrels have previously been recorded as vagrants to Falkland islands (Gregory 1994), to southeast Australia, as well as a record from between Cape Horn and the Antarctic Peninsula, approximately 1 500 km from its closest breeding grounds (Carboneras *et al.* 2016). Wintering/non-breeding birds are known to spend time in the vicinity of the breeding islands and/or the Polar Frontal Zone (Cherel *et al.* 2006), with breeding birds restricted to the region of the breeding islands (Ridoux 1994). The closest breeding island of any diving-petrel species to our observation site is Gough Island approximately 1 400 km away, where Common Diving Petrels breed (Shirihai 2007). Thus, it has been assumed that diving-petrels seen in the area of our observation have been Common Diving Petrels (Ryan & Cooper 1983, AS@S 2016). However, because of the difficulties of identifying diving-petrels at sea, South Georgian Diving Petrels may have previously been overlooked in the area and assumed to be Common Diving Petrels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), BirdLife South Africa and the crew of the *SA Agulhas II* for the opportunity to conduct seabird surveys during the July 2016 winter cruise. Thanks to Alan Tennyson for comments on an early draft.

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