

BRISBANE SEABIRD STUDY GROUP
Rare Seabird Forms



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Participants: (full name).

Contact details: (include address, phone no(s), E-mail, etc.).

- 1). William Abbott
- 2). Richard Baxter
- 2). Geoff Jones
- 3). Steve Murray
- 4). Brian Russell
- 5). David Stewart

No. of observers present: 13

Vessel: Laura J – a 90 ft monohull

Crew: Mark Grosskreutz (skipper), Craig Newton (deckie), Richard Cavill (deckie, chef)

Date of sighting: 12th & 13th April 2014

Time & duration of sighting: The submission relates to 3 sightings over the course of two days.

April 12th 2014

Sighting 1: 09.30hrs – observed for 15 seconds down to ca.50m

Sighting 2: 15.45hrs – observed for 50 seconds down to ca. 30m

April 13th 2014

Sighting 3: 14.5hrs – observed for 40 seconds down to ca. 40m

Species name: **Common: Collared Petrel** **Scientific: *Pterodroma brevipes***

No. of birds observed: 3 (each sighting involving a single bird)

Location: 27 33.07S/155 01.36E, 27 41.53S/155 13.41E, 28 10.11S/155 35.01E. The Queensland and Britannia Sea Mounts.
Be precise & include GPS readings when possible.

Habitat (indicate in appropriate box).

Bay/Inlet	Headland	River Mouth	Ocean Beach	Shelf Waters	Slope Waters	Open Ocean	Other
						X	

Optical and/or other aids used: Swarovski 10x50 and Canon 7D (DM), Nikon 8x42 (PB), Swarovski 12x50 (RM), Canon 5D mk III (RWS)

Prior experience with this species: No one on this submission had prior experience of this species but all are familiar with a number of cookilaria and related petrels. The combined experience of the group includes Black-winged, Cook's, Gould's, Mottled, Pycroft's, Soft-plumaged and Stejneger's Petrels.

Confidence in sighting? (e.g. 90%, 100% etc.): 100%.

Received:

BQRAC Case No:

BARC Case No:

Recommendation:

(Office Use Only)

FORM B

Weather Conditions: (including wind speed & direction).

The category 5 Cyclone Ita crossed the far north Queensland coast late on Friday 11th April. This in addition to a fairly intense low over the southern NSW coast that worked its way northwards, resulted in gusty NW-N winds (20+ knots) on the Friday evening. These winds eased slightly to 15-20 knots from the north on Saturday whilst a projected strong southerly change over Saturday evening never really eventuated. Sunday saw light SE winds, freshening slightly later in the day.

The viewing conditions were reasonable-to-good both days with some high cloud, but mainly fine sunny conditions on Saturday and increasing cloud cover on Sunday with the SE change. The maximum air temperature over the weekend was 26° C whilst the barometer read 1012 hPa.

Sea Conditions: (including water temp. °C, when possible).

Seas to 1.5 metres on a 2 metre swell on the Saturday, easing to slight seas on a 2-3 metre swell from the SE on the Sunday. Sea-surface temperatures were 24-25° C.

General Observations: (include behaviour of bird(s), view, distance etc).

All sightings were made over relatively light seas without the birds being lost behind waves for more than a very brief moment or not at all. The 1st and 3rd sighting were made in good light, whilst the 2nd sighting was initially in good light but as it moved behind the boat it was increasing poorly lit (as obvious in the photographs); another or the same Collared Petrel was seen very shortly after this 2nd sighting and although considered to be another all-dark cookilaria with a strongly contrasting white chin/throat-patch it was not seen well enough and in too poor light to include here. It was probably the same bird as the 2nd sighting as it was noted within minutes of the previous sighting.

The three included sightings were all relatively brief (less than one minute) and were observed to within 30-50 metres.

Each of the Collared Petrels flew in a similar manner with an active, relatively fast flight with somewhat 'flicky' wing beats lacking the more powerful wing beats or higher arcs of the larger pterodromas. Minor changes of direction were relatively frequent but progress in a particular direction was fairly consistent and all three birds stayed fairly low to the water (mostly 1-2 m but up to 3 m at most). Each of the three birds passed relatively quickly and showed no interest in the dispersed berley trail behind the moving boat.

Description of Bird(s): (be as detailed as possible).Summary description:

(1) **Number:** three sightings over two days. The two sightings on the first day (12th April) were widely separated in time but involved birds that could not be distinguished by the views we had. The third sighting (13th April) was clearly a different individual (whiter underwing and marginally paler underparts).

(2) **Age, sex:** uncertain

Sightings #1 and 2:

Possibly relating to the same bird (although seen almost 6 hours apart) and described just once as no discernable differences in plumage or flight style were noted. RM saw the 1st bird well but few others aboard were able to get on to this brief sighting. DM noted the second bird only 30m from the boat, it was also seen well in good light by PB and RM, and luckily most of the group was able to make it to the stern in time to watch as it made its way down the dispersed berley trail and away from the boat.

Descriptions will be kept relatively brief as the photos show most details perfectly well.

(3a) Size and shape: Small *Pterodroma*, notably slight even for a cookilaria with a slim body and long tail. It might be overly confident to suggest that we could note that these birds were sligher than the structurally similar Gould's Petrels that we saw both days, but they were certainly very lightly built. NKH, RWS and RH instantly thought that the combination of dark coloration, slender jizz and flight style were somewhat reminiscent of Bulwer's Petrel. Interestingly, Bretagnolle & Shirihihi (2010) describe Magnificent Petrel as follows: "It habitually flies very low, with short and low (steep) banks and arcs, long and very low glides, often with sudden sharp turns. Many times the birds adopt the flight mode and path of Bulwer's Petrel or prions (*Pachyptila*), a similarity heightened by their distinctive structure, with relatively short wings but a proportionately long pointed tail. Our impression is that it will prove possible to distinguish these birds on the basis of their distinctive flight behaviour and shape alone, given prolonged views and previous experience with *P. brevipes*. Furthermore, they are often notably slight-bodied and smaller with a shorter bill."

(4a) Plumage colour and pattern: The birds involved in the 1st and 2nd sighting were at the dark end of the spectrum for Collared Petrels, being almost uniformly dark apart from the strongly contrasting white face/throat-patch. The body was a dark brown-grey with only a very marginal and gradational lightening towards the undertail coverts (fig. 1). The typical M upperwing of many cookilaria petrels was not particularly striking on these birds, indeed the upperwings appeared predominantly dark with only a slight contrast between the darker 'M' and the outer secondaries and the leading edge of the upper inner-wing (figs 2 & 3). The underwings were also mostly dark with dark-grey remiges and a particularly prominent and thick black carpal bar. The carpal bar extends from the leading edge of the outer underwing, through the carpal area and then diagonally back towards the axillaries (fig. 1). A thin pale-grey line bordered the rear edge of this carpal bar or 'tick mark' and is probably formed by greyish median coverts. An obvious pale greyish wedge is also present broadening from the mid axillaries to the innermost leading edge of the underwing (fig. 1). The rear axillaries were dark grey-brown. The upper tail is not easily seen in the photographs but is perhaps just discernable in figs 2 & 3 which seem to show that the tail tip is marginally darker than the rest of the upper tail and the upper tail coverts (though this is

considerably more obvious on the 3rd bird seen the following day). The crown, nape and uppermost breast were very marginally darker than the rest of the body and contrasted strongly with the obvious white face-patch. This white face-patch included only a narrow white band on the forehead and also encompassed the chin, throat and lower cheeks. The white face-patch is aligned horizontally across the cheeks with a hint of an indent behind the eye (figs. 4 & 5). The rear border of this throat/face-patch turns abruptly downwards to form the dark vertical 'collar'.

(5a) Bill shape, colour and structure: The bill was all dark and seemed relatively fine, but was otherwise fairly typical of the smaller cookilaria.

(6a) Colour of eyes and legs/feet: not noted but eyes appear to be dark.

Sighting #3:

RH and RWS picked this bird up first from positions near the bow, before it passed along the side of the boat and showed well to those at the stern, then turned and disappeared in a starboard direction.

(3a) Size and shape: As for sightings 1 and 2.

(4a) Plumage colour and pattern: Although another very dark individual this bird was marginally paler than those observed the previous day and had a notably paler underwing pattern. The very dark brown-grey head, neck sides and uppermost breast clearly contrasted with the slightly paler (though still dark brown) lower breast and belly (fig. 6). There was also a clearer gradational lightening in tone towards the undertail coverts (fig. 7). There was also a greater apparent contrast in the upperwing, with a slightly stronger 'M' pattern (although this could be partly due to the better light conditions) (fig. 8). The greatest differences though were in the underwing. The black carpal bar was not quite as thick, though still very prominent and the pale greyish/off-white rear border to this black bar was much broader and clearly more noticeable. This pale greyish/off-white line through the middle of the underwing appears to be formed by greater and median secondary coverts and greater primary coverts (the median primary coverts are darker greyer) (fig. 6). In contrast to the birds seen the previous day, the axillaries of this bird were more extensively white and again broadened towards the leading edge of the innermost underwing (fig. 9). The white face-patch again shows the diagnostic horizontal alignment across the cheek before turning abruptly down to form the dark collar (fig. 6 & 8).

(5a) Bill shape and structure: as for sightings 1 and 2

(6a) Colour of eyes and legs/feet: again, not noted but eyes appear to be dark

How was it distinguished from other similar species?:

All the larger Pterodroma species are easily eliminated by plumage, structure and jizz. These birds were all clearly small cookilaria and as such, focus on distinguishing these birds from other cookilaria would normally represent the main challenge, particularly for pale Collared Petrels. However there are no real confusion species for dark-morph Collared Petrels when seen even reasonably well – and these birds were seen extremely well. As such this section is relatively brief and does not cover all the cookilaria petrels:

Gould's Petrels are probably the closest match on structure and jizz but are easily eliminated as dark forms have not been recorded. However, they can be further eliminated as the observed birds seemed to be marginally sligher with particularly slimmer bodies and longer-tailed. A less subjective difference is provided by the diagnostic facial patterns. Gould's Petrels have a dark hood that runs diagonally across the face without a pale indent towards the rear of the cheeks and no hint of an upward tick around the rear of the ear coverts. Whilst the diagnostic horizontal alignment of the dark face and white cheeks on Collared Petrels can be seen in the photographs of the 2nd and 3rd birds with even a hint of slight upward tick around the ear coverts on the 2nd bird (figs. 4 & 5). The extremely thick black carpal bars further rule out Gould's Petrels.

Stejneger's Petrels bear some similarities, but again are unknown to have a darker form/morph and are thus easily ruled out. They have considerably paler underwings with a very narrow, dark trailing edge and a much thinner dark carpal bar. Most importantly there are also diagnostic differences in the head pattern, although these are clearly more important for separating from pale Collared Petrels. Stejneger's Petrel would exhibit a stronger upward tick or crescent at the back of the ear coverts and also has a broader white forehead that may extend towards the crown. Stejneger's Petrels also have a broader black tail-band.

Mottled Petrel is again easily ruled out, as it is a larger, deeper-chested bird with a more powerful flight action. Furthermore even the darkest Mottled Petrels differ in showing a dark belly-patch that does not extend to the undertail coverts and becomes paler towards the upper breast and throat. None exhibit such dark underwings, having only a narrow dark trailing edge and the mostly white underwing thus contrasts strongly with the black carpal bar.

Intermediate to dark-morph Soft-plumaged Petrels are readily distinguished as they lack the black carpal bar present on the observed birds and the paler line of coverts that outlines the rear edge of this carpal bar. The paler chin on intermediate and dark-morph Soft-plumaged Petrels is not nearly so well defined, with very diffuse margins. Thus it lacks the clear-cut and diagnostic white face-patch as described above for Collared Petrels. These darker Soft-plumaged Petrels also have a thicker, dark tail-band and almost fully dark upperwings lacking almost any hint of the cookilaria 'M' pattern that would contrast strongly with a paler back/mantle (only a very thin, dark bar runs across the lower back).

All other cookilaria petrels are easily eliminated by the dark body, largely dark underwings and distinctive head pattern.

Although superficially similar (see above), the *Bulweria* species (especially Bulwer's Petrel *B. bulwerii*) were also easily ruled out by shape and plumage pattern.

Other Comments:

The identification of these birds was straight-forward as the three sightings involved very dark individuals with no real confusion species. The first two sightings involved extremely dark individuals that fit perfectly with the very dark Collared Petrels observed and collected from the Banks Islands, Vanuatu and recently described as a new subspecies – *Pterodroma brevipes magnificens* (tentatively known as the ‘Magnificent’ Petrel) – by Bretagnolle & Shirihai (2010). The 3rd sighting was again a dark individual and easily identified as a Collared Petrel, however it had considerably more white in the underwing, a slightly paler undertail and even some contrast between the darker head and neck and marginally paler underparts. This individual could relate to the paler *P. b. magnificens* from the Banks Islands or the darkest *P. b. brevipes* as observed and collected from Fiji (see Figures 1, 2, 4-12 in Bretagnolle & Shirihai 2010).

Gould’s Petrels *Pterodroma leucoptera* are the closest allies/relatives of the Collared Petrel (indeed they were considered conspecific by many sources until relatively recently) and were infrequently observed on both days on the Queensland and Britannia seamounts. This allowed comparisons to be made between the two species, even though both taxa were never in-view simultaneously.

This report represents the first submitted observations of Collared Petrels from an Australian mainland pelagic (albeit a 3 night trip). All previous Australia records were from the vicinity of Norfolk Island: these 6 records mostly involve multiple sightings (BARC submissions no. 603-608, 2007-2009).

Other species seen: (as taken from Paul Walbridge’s trip report)

12th & 13th April 2014

Red-tailed Tropicbird - 1
White-tailed Tropicbird - 6 (3)
Polynesian Storm Petrel - 1
Wilson’s Storm Petrel - 110 (32)
‘Coral Sea/New Caledonian’ Storm Petrel - 25 (7)
White-faced Storm Petrel - 3 (1)
Wedge-tailed Shearwater - 288 (40)
Flesh-footed Shearwater - 70 (20)
Sooty Shearwater - 2 (1)
Streaked Shearwater - 1
Tahiti Petrel - 86 (15)
Kermadec Petrel - 51 (3)
Great-winged Petrel - 47 (12) all *gouldi*
Providence Petrel - 12 (2)
Gould’s Petrel - 11 (1)
Arctic Jaeger - 2 (1)
Common Noddy - 2 (1)
White Tern - 3 (1)
Sooty Tern - 31 (3)

References used:

The birds were immediately identified in the field but several books and papers were reviewed during the course of the submission.

BRETAGNOLLE, V. & SHIRIHAI, H. (2010): A new taxon of Collared Petrel *Pterodroma brevipes* from the Banks Islands, Vanuatu. Bulletin of the British Ornithologist’s Club 130 (4).

MARCHANT, S. & HIGGINS, P.J. (eds) (1990): Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 1: Ratites to Ducks. Melbourne.

ONLEY, D. & SCOFIELD, P. (2007): Albatrosses, Petrels & Shearwaters of the World. Princeton.

ROBERSON, D. & BAILEY, S.F. (1991): Cookilaria Petrels in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Part II of a two part series. American Birds 45 (5).

SHIRIHAI, H. (2007, 2nd ed.): A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife. London.

FORM C – PHOTOS



Figure 1: Collared Petrel (2nd sighting), 12th April 2014. Note the very dark body, lacking any paler feathers on the belly or undertail and limited contrast with the dark cap, nape and neck sides (thus typical of *Pterodroma brevipes magnificens*). Note also the very dark underwings with an extremely thick black carpal bar running from the leading edge of the outerwing through the carpal area and diagonally back towards the axillaries; only the grey median coverts form a pale line bordering the trailing edge of this thick black carpal bar (this wing pattern is also considered typical if not diagnostic of *P. b. magnificens*). A conspicuous block of pale greyish feathers is also present at the leading edge of the innermost underwing. Photo: RWS



Figures 2 & 3: Collared Petrel (2nd sighting), 12th April 2014. Note the extensively dark upperwings without the prominent ‘M pattern’ typical of many cookilaria. Also note the limited contrast between the upperparts and the very dark head and neck sides. Photos: RWS



Figures 4 & 5: Collared Petrel (2nd sighting), 12th April 2014. Note the diagnostic head pattern with the white face patch extending across the cheeks with a horizontal alignment, a slight indication of an upward tick around the rear of the ear coverts and then an abrupt downturn to the vertical collar. Photos: RWS & DM respectively



Figure 6: Collared Petrel (3rd sighting), 13th April 2014. Note the clearly paler underwings of this individual, with a thinner though still broad, black carpal bar and a more extensive pale grey/off-white line running through the middle of the underwing as formed by the greater primary and greater and median secondary coverts. Photo: RWS



Figure 7: Collared Petrel (3rd sighting), 13th April 2014. Note the underparts get gradually paler from the dark lower throat/upper breast to the undertail coverts. Photo: RWS



Figure 8: Collared Petrel (3rd sighting), 13th April 2014. Again note the largely dark upperwing and poorly defined 'M pattern' and the extensive dark tail tip contrasting with the paler uppermost tail and upper tail coverts. Photo: RWS



Figure 9: Collared Petrel (3rd sighting), 13th April 2014. Note the axillaries are fully white to off-white on this slightly paler individual.
Photo: RWS