# NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee
# Unusual Record Report Form

| **Full Name:**<br>Nikolas K. Haass (NKH), Raja W. Stephenson (RWS) | Office Use |
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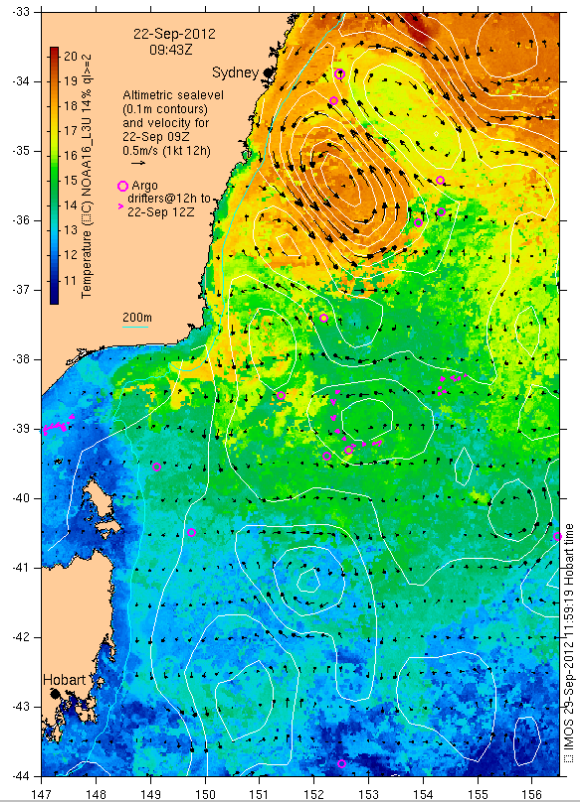
| **Species Name:**<br>**Grey-headed Albatross** | **Scientific Name:**<br>***Thalassarche chrysostoma*** |
|---|---|
| Date(s) and time(s) of observation: | 22 September 2012; 8:01 am |
| How long did you watch the bird(s)? | Approx. 1 min |
| First and last date of occurrence: | 22 September 2012 |
| Distance to bird: | Down to 100 m |

**Site Location:** Above the continental shelf off Wollongong, NSW.
**Habitat:** Neritic zone

**Sighting conditions**: We were heading out (east) in the morning (8:01 am), when the bird came straight out of the sun glare and flew west past the boat into better light conditions, clear visibility, see attached pictures. For sea surface temperature see chart (right). Unfortunately, the bird made only one pass.

**Optical aids used**: Leica 12x50 BA (NKH); Canon 7D, Canon 400 mm, f5.6 (RWS)

**Were other observers present? Do any of the other observers disagree with your identification?**
Lindsay Smith, Angus Molyneux, Heyn De Kock, Hagai Loyewski, Darryl McKay, Jim O'Shea, Steve Bottomley, Bente Jensen, Peter Jensen, Niels Behrendt, Keith Rigby, Clement Yu, Linda Cohen, Dena Paris, Sandrine Zawadzki, Yann Senotier, Maté Biro, Shalin Seebah, Christine Darwood. There was a debate about the identification of this bird - see physical description for detail. See comments by other seabirders based on the photos (Haass 2012a, online discussion). Further to this, Jeff Davies, Kevin Bartram and Alvaro Jaramillo (pers. comm.) agreed with the identification based on viewing the photographs and the description.




**To your knowledge, is the species seen frequently at this site?**
Rarely (*cf.* map, Figure 10). There are only few well-documented records. While on the one hand most claims of juvenile/immature Grey-headed Albatross (GHAL) are now considered likely to have been instead juvenile/immature Black-browed *Th. melanophris* (BBAL) or Campbell Albatross *Th. impavida* (CAAL), on the other hand white-headed immature GHAL may be underreported due to misidentification as BBAL or CAAL (SMITH & WHYLIE 2009).

**Did you use a field guide?**
The bird was identified in the field without using a field guide. References used subsequently to prepare this report are listed below. In addition, a large number of photographs of unequivocal Grey-headed Albatrosses were studied. ENTICOTT, J. & D. TIPLING (1997): Seabirds of the World. London. • ERTEL R. & B. ROSE (1997): [First African record of Buller's Albatross *Diomedea bulleri*.] (German with English summary) *Limicola* 11: 306-309. • FITTER, J. & D. MERTON (2011): Birds of New Zealand. • HARRISON, P. (1983): Seabirds, an Identification Guide. Beckenham. •

HARRISON, P. (1987): Seabirds of the World. A Photographic Guide. London. • HEATHER, B. & H. ROBERTSON (2005, 2nd ed.): The Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand. • HOWELL, S.N.G. (2012): Petrels, Albatrosses, and Storm-Petrels of North America: A Photographic Guide. Princeton. • DEL HOYO, J., A. ELLIOTT & J. SARGATAL (eds) (1992): Handbook of the Birds of the World. Vol. 1. - Barcelona. • MARCHANT, S. & P.J. HIGGINS (eds) (1990). Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 1: Ratites to Ducks. Melbourne. • MURPHY, R.C. (1936): Oceanic birds of South America. • ONLEY, D. & P. SCOFIELD (2007): Albatrosses, Petrels & Shearwaters of the World. Princeton. • PRINCE, P.A. & S.P. RODWELL (1994): Aging Immature Black-browed and Grey-headed Albatrosses - Using Moult, Bill and Plumage Characteristics. *Emu* 94: 246-254. • DE ROY, T., M. JONES & J. FITTER (2009): Albatross, Their World, their Ways. CSIRO. • SHIRIHAI, H. (2007, 2nd ed.): A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife. London. • SIMPSON, K. & N. DAY (2004, 7th ed.): Birds of Australia. Princeton. • SMITH, L. & B. WHYLIE (2009): Grey-headed Albatrosses in NSW. *The Albatross* 43: 3. • TICKELL, W.L.N. (2000): Albatrosses. Pica Press. Sussex. U.K.

**On-line references:**
Engblom, G. (2010): Discussion of a 'Mystery albatross on Lima Pelagic' 6th May 2010 (with comments from Chris Robertson, Alvaro Jaramillo & Brian Patteson).
http://kolibriexpeditions.com/birdingperu/blog/mystery-albatross-on-lima-pelagic/
Haass, N.K. (2012a): Discussion of a juvenile Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, 22nd September 2012 (this is about the bird reported here; with comments from Tobias Hayashi & Mick Roderick).
http://www.sossa-international.org/forum/showthread.php?156-juvenile-Grey-headed-Albatross
Haass, N.K. (2012b): Discussion of a grey-headed Black-browed Albatross off Sydney, 14th July 2012.
http://www.sossa-international.org/forum/showthread.php?148-grey-headed-Black-browed-Albatross
Pym, T. (undated): Identifying Grey-headed and Pacific (Buller's) Albatrosses on the Water
http://www.seabirding.co.uk/ImmatureAlbatrossesPage2.html
Smith, L. (2011): Discussion of white-headed Grey-headed Albatross in NSW (with comments from NKH & Tobias Hayashi).
http://www.sossa-international.org/forum/showthread.php?38-The-White-Headed-Grey-Headed-Albatross-(juvenile-Grey-headed-Albatrosses)
Wildscreen Arkive (undated): This photo by Bradley W Stahl shows an immature GHAL (not BBAL):
http://www.arkive.org/black-browed-albatross/thalassarche-melanophrys/image-G15608.html
Wilson, A./Oceanwanderers: http://www.oceanwanderers.com/Gryh.Alb.html

**How confident are you of your identification?** See detailed description.

## Physical Description

(1) **Number**: one individual was observed.
(2) **Age, sex**: stage 1 (juvenile or younger immature)
(3) **Size and shape**: Small to mid-sized mollymawk. NKH's first impression was 'Grey-headed Albatross', hence NKH immediately alerted the other participants on the boat by shouting "Possible Grey-headed Albatross!" Although the perception of size and jizz is very subjective in nature, it shows at least that the bird appeared 'different' from the 100 BBAL and the one 2nd year CAAL that were seen during the trip and hence allowed for some comparison: The here described bird looked 'stouter' than BBAL/CAAL, i.e. shorter- and thicker-necked (bull-necked).
(4) **Plumage colour and pattern**:
***Head and neck***: entirely dark velvety grey with a marginally paler forehead, a whitish chin and pale grey cheek. The distribution of paler and whitish areas matches the described areas of feathers with narrower grey tips, which consequently turn white due to wear more quickly (MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990). Obviously, this field mark alone is not diagnostic as young BBAL and CAAL are commonly grey-headed and are frequently misidentified as GHAL (e.g. HAASS 2012b, online discussion), but the greyness of the bird reported here appeared different: somewhat velvety. Kevin Bartram (pers. comm.): "The most convincing is the grey head, which looks leaden grey or bluish grey, without brownish tones."
***Eye-patch***: prominent and diffuse before the eye, only narrow and weak above the eye and quickly petering out behind the eye. In other words, the dark around the eye appeared more like a shadow and its weight was in front of the eye. This caused a facial expression dissimilar to that of a BBAL (however, further research on this is certainly needed on the eyebrow shape of CAAL at this age).
***Eye-crescent***: Contrasting white crescent bordering the rear and bottom of the eye (similar in shape to that of adult GHAL but duller). However, Mick Roderick commented on this feature: "Don't BBAL also have white lower eye-lids but the contrast is just harder to see because of the pale/white heads?" (Haass 2012a, online discussion).
***Upperparts***: No strong contrast between the hood and the grey mantle; blackish back and upperwings; white rump and uppertail coverts; blackish tail.
***Underparts***: Sharp demarcation from dark hood to the strongly contrasting white chest and underparts (all the way from the chest down to the undertail coverts).
***Underwings***: Black leading edge and primaries; dark grey secondaries; entire remainder of underwing reflective charcoal grey, palest (or most reflective) being the greater coverts. The lack of any white indicates the young age.
***Moult***: No evidence for primary moult.

(5) **Colour of bill, eyes and legs/feet**:
***Overall bill colour***: greyish with black mandibular unguis. This is in agreement with the description in some (e.g. MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990; HEATHER & ROBERTSON 2005; ONLEY & SCOFIELD 2007), but in disagreement with others (e.g. HARRISON 1983; HARRISON 1987; DEL HOYO *et al.* 1992; ENTICOTT & TIPLING 1997; DE ROY *et al.* 2009; HOWELL 2012) and some recent comments on the bill colour of juvenile GHAL (e.g. Alvaro Jaramillo and Brian Patteson). SHIRIHAI (2007) uses the entirely black bill in conjunction with correct ageing as a diagnostic field mark, but also describes the bill as 'dark greyish brown-black with prominent blacker tip'. Jeff Davies (pers. comm.): "…paler bill body with darker tip appears to be a feature of the youngest birds [GHAL]. A closer photo would probably reveal the characteristic pale longitudinal feature which starts at the face and projects outwards along the bottom edge of the ramicorn, it seems to always be there from the youngest age." Kevin Bartram (pers. comm.): "The bill colour if anything would point to Grey-headed! Yes, they tend to have black bills, but very young juveniles have an olivaceous tinge to the bill. This differs from Black-browed, which can have blackish also, but has more brownish tones. I tend to think it's a Grey-headed juvenile."
Interestingly, this bird did not show an obvious pale halo between the maxillary unguis and the culminicorn (typical of BBAL; Jeff Davies, pers. comm.).
***Naricorn***: Most importantly, there appears be a separate area bordered by the nostril, the culminicorn, the ramicorn and the feathered face (Fig. 6; *cf.* Fig. 7). Although the resolution of the photos is unfortunately not high enough to show sufficient details, this feature is consistent with the membranous naricorn diagnostic of GHAL but missing in BBAL/CAAL (MURPHY 1936; MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990; PRINCE & RODWELL 1994; SIMPSON & DAY 2004). The membranous naricorn of a GHAL is nicely shown in ERTEL & ROSE (1997).
***Bill shape***: The bill did not exhibit a 'ski slope' shape or a pinched effect, said to be typical of GHAL. However, this is not sufficient to rule out a GHAL (*cf.* Fig. 8)
***Iris***: dark brown/blackish
(6) **Calls**: None heard.
(7) **Behaviour, movements, flight pattern, feeding, interactions with other birds, comparisons with other species:** Nothing to support specific identification.

**Further discussion and analysis of published photographs**:
HARRISON (1987) shows two photographs of 'classic' individuals: one immature and one adult. Eye patch shape and prominent white eye crescent match the bird reported here, in contrast to the photograph of an immature BBAL on the same page. Also note the difference in overall jizz between the two species. However, the immature GHAL's bill appears entirely black, as discussed in the accompanying text and also already in HARRISON (1983). Interestingly, HARRISON (1983) reports the underwings of juvenile GHAL to be the darkest of all mollymawks. He does not repeat this statement in HARRISON (1987). *Contra* HARRISON (1983) to our own experience, juvenile BBAL and CAAL show entirely dark charcoal underwings and therefore we prefer not to use this feature as a field mark.
ENTICOTT & TIPLING (1997) show four photographs of 'classic' GHALs: one juvenile, one immature (same photograph as in HARRISON 1987) and two adult birds. Plumage coloration of head & neck, eye patch and eye crescent of the juvenile and immature birds, respectively, match the bird reported in this submission. In contrast, the young BBALs (one of which is mislabeled as a Shy Albatross!) show eye patches typical for that species. However, in both the juvenile and the immature GHALs the bills appear entirely black, as discussed in the accompanying text.
SHIRIHAI (2007) shows two photographs of adult and one photograph each of a juvenile, young imm, older imm and 2nd/3rd year GHAL. Again overall jizz, eye patch shape and the prominent white eye crescent remind of the bird reported here. While the figure legend to the juvenile GHAL as well as the 'separation from other species' section emphasize a uniform dark bill, the description section states 'dark greyish brown-black with prominent blacker tip'.
FITTER & MERTON (2011) show two photographs of an adult, one of a sub-adult and one of a juvenile. The latter resembling the bird reported here.
HOWELL (2012) shows one photograph of an immature GHAL, which stands out of a series of photographs of BBAL and is reminiscent of the bird reported here with regards to overall jizz, eye patch shape and the prominent white eye crescent. Again, the bill appears entirely dark grey/blackish, as discussed in the accompanying text.
DEL HOYO *et al*. (1992), TICKELL (2000) and DE ROY *et al.* (2009) show only photographs of adult and downy chick GHAL.

Figure 1: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Photograph: Raja Stephenson.


Figure 2: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Photograph: Raja Stephenson.

Figure 3: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Photograph: Raja Stephenson.

Figure 4: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Photograph: Angus Molyneux.

Figure 5: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Photograph: Angus Molyneux.

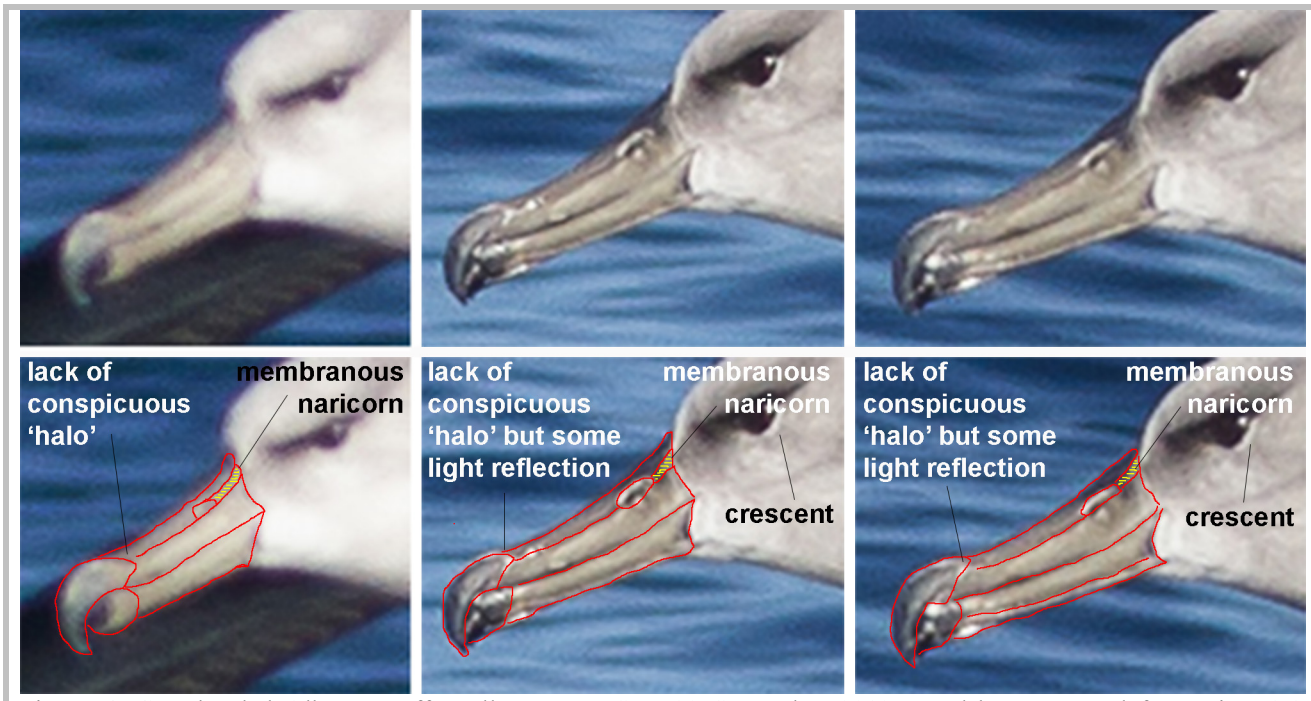



Figure 6: Grey-headed Albatross off Wollongong, NSW, 22 September 2012. Headshots, cropped from Figs. 1-3. Compare area of membranous naricorn to Figure 7. Photographs: Raja Stephenson.

Figure 7: Bills of museum specimens of a Grey-headed (left) and a Black-browed Albatross (right). Note the broad membranous naricorn of the GHAL separating culminicorn and ramicorn proximal of the nostril and compare to the lack of the broad membranous naricorn in the BBAL, where culminicorn and ramicorn meet proximal of the nostril. Photographs: Rob Hynson.

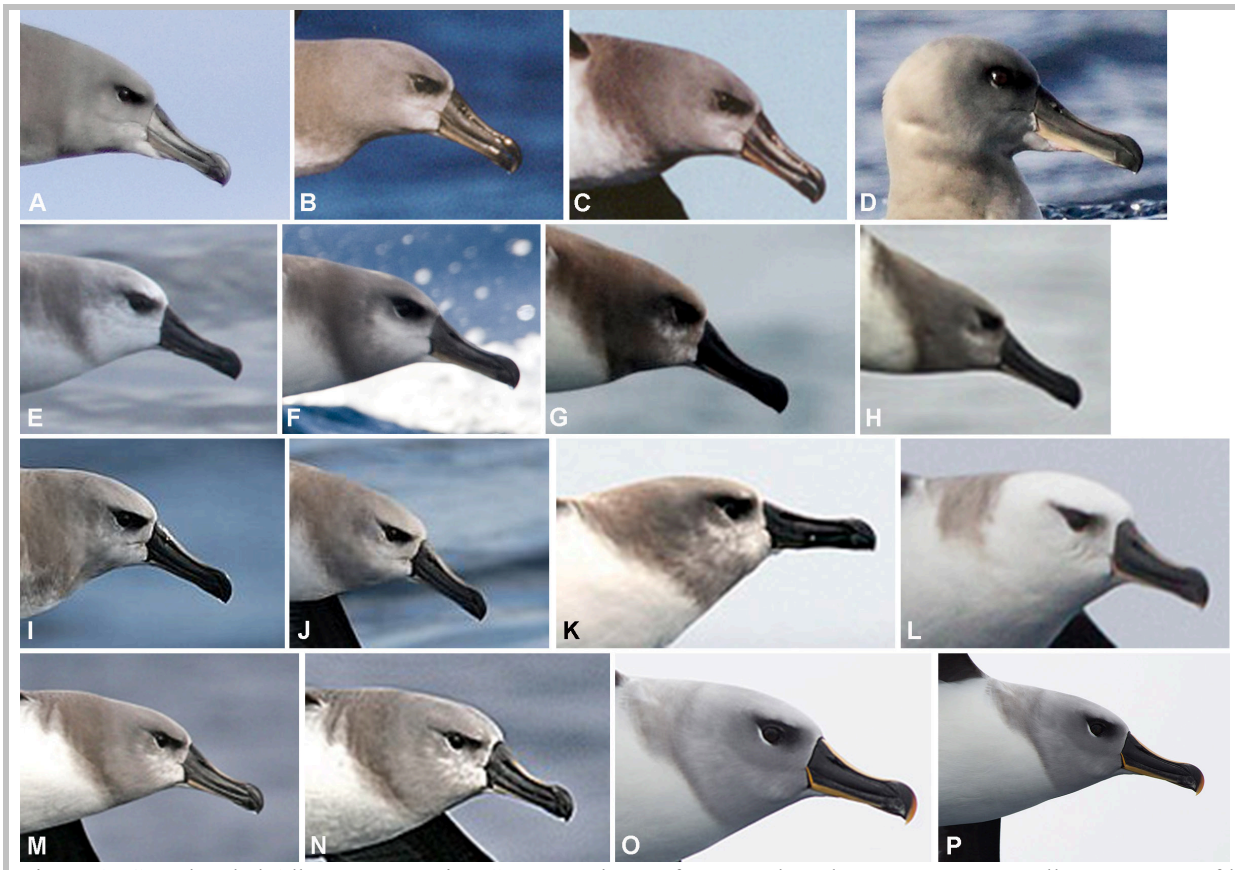



Figure 8: Grey-headed Albatross portraits. Compare shape of eye patch and eye crescent as well as greyness of hood to the bird reported here (Figures 1-6). Photographs: (A) Colin Rogers, (B) Murray Lord, (C) Murray Lord, (D) Colin Rogers, (E) James Lowe, (F) Geoff Jones, (G) Hal Epstein, (H) Alvaro Jaramillo, (I) John Graham, (J) John Graham, (K) Brian Patteson, (L) Geoff Walker, (M) Pete Morris, (N) Pete Morris, (O) Geoff Walker, (P) Geoff Walker

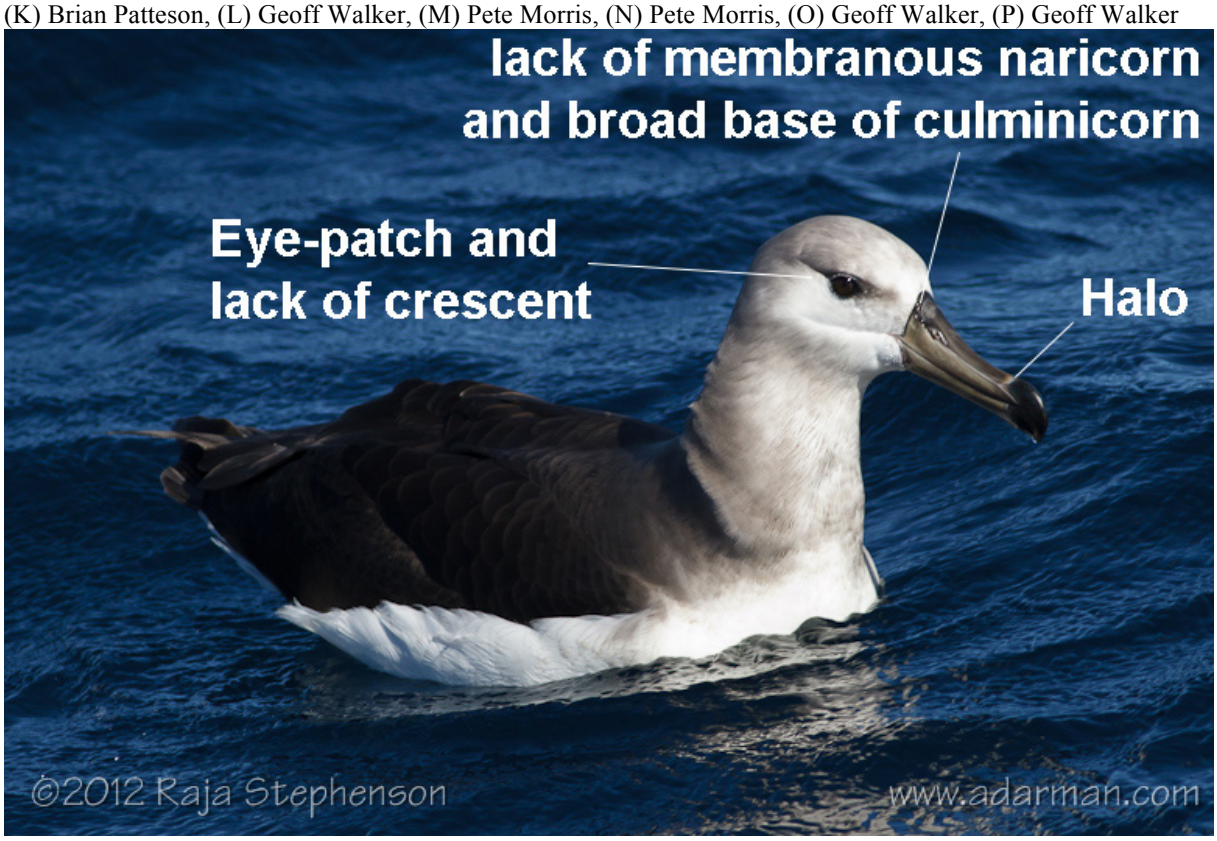



Figure 9: Black-browed Albatross off Sydney, NSW, 14 July 2012. There was a discussion about the identification of this bird. While some favoured GHAL, we identified this bird as a juvenile BBAL based on bill colour, the halo between maxillary unguis and culminicorn/latericorn, the virtual lack of a membranous naricorn, the broad base of the culminicorn and the more BBAL-like eye-patch lacking a crescent. Photograph: Raja Stephenson.

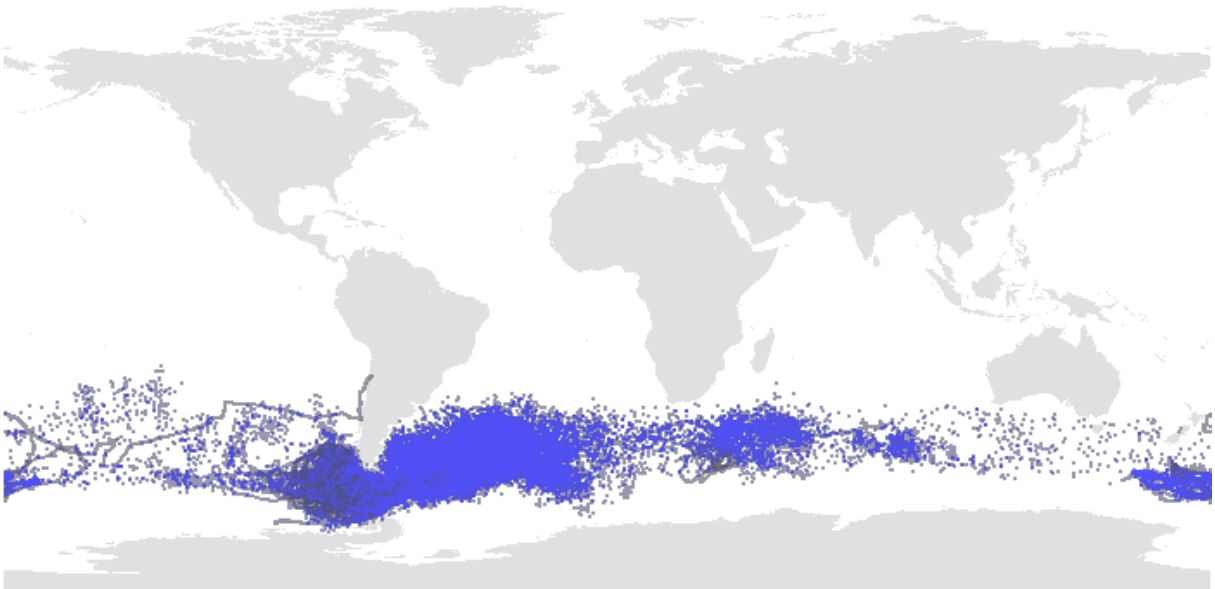


Figure 10: Grey-headed Albatross tracks. Source: BirdLife International, Seabird Tracking Database (http://www.seabirdtracking.org/dataset.php)

**Other species seen:** Gibson's *Diomedea (antipodensis) gibsoni* 4 (1 caught), Wandering *D. exulans* 1 (caught), Black-browed *Thalassarche melanophrys* 100 (1 caught), Campbell *T. impavida* 1 (2nd year), Indian Yellow-nosed *T. carteri* 6 (1 caught) and Shy/White-capped Albatross *T. cauta/steadi* 15 (some were very fresh juveniles, possibly *steadi*); also of note were two Southern Giant-Petrels *Macronectes giganteus* (but the lack of Northern Giant-Petrels *M. halli*) and swarming krill causing large red patches on the ocean surface. For non-albatross species see detailed trip report: http://www.sossa-international.org/forum/content.php?490-Saturday-22nd-SEPTEMBER-2012-SOSSA-PELAGIC-TRIP-WOLLONGONG-NSW-AUSTRALIA

**Other species with which you think it might be confused and how these were eliminated?**
There are only two similar species: BBAL and CAAL. While none of the above-discussed field marks alone would suffice to rule out these two species, the combination of all field marks clearly does rule out BBAL and CAAL.
All other mollymawk species *Thalassarche* were easily ruled out by their very different underwing pattern.

**Was the description written from notes and/or sketches made** (tick box):
☒ during the observation or; ☐ shortly after the observation or; ☐ from memory; ☒ with the aid of the photographs; ☐ with the aid of measurements

**Please indicate supportive evidence available.**
Was the bird: ☒ photographed, ~~☐ taped or ☐ video taped~~? If yes to any of these, by whom?
Raja Stephenson, for more photographs see here:
http://www.adarman.com/Pelagics/New-South-Wales-Pelagics/2012-September-22-Wollongong/

**What experience have you had with the species in question?**
**NKH** has extensive experience with seabirds having been pelagic trip leader on many trips off New South Wales, Tasmania, California, New Jersey/New York and Delaware/Maryland and having participated on many pelagic trips off North Carolina, Galapagos, Queensland and New Zealand. NKH has been an active member in the Rare Birds Committees of New Jersey (USA), Hessen and Schleswig-Holstein (both Germany). Following IOC 4.3, NKH has seen 17 albatross species around the world and 15 in Australia. **RWS** has seen 14 albatross species. Although NKH & RWS had only ever seen one Grey-headed Albatross before (off Sydney, 10th July 2010; see separate submission), they are very familiar with Black-browed and Campbell Albatross from many observations off Sydney and Wollongong (NSW), Southport (QLD), Port MacDonnell (SA), Eaglehawk Neck (TAS), and/or Kaikoura (NZ).

**Signature:** 

**Date: 15th September 2014**