SOUTHERN OCEAN SEABIRD STUDY ASSOCIATION INC.

The Albatross

Issue No. 37 July 2006

From the Editor:

Special points of interest:

- Janice's OAM
- First Great Shearwater for Wollongong
- Familiar faces at Coffs Harbour
- A Generous Donation
- North Royals at Taiaroa

CONTENTS

A New Bird for the Wollongong Pelagic Trip

Text and photos by Brook Whylie

As the Wollongong pelagic trips have been running for over twenty years, it is now a major event when a new bird is sighted. This was certainly the case on the 22nd April 2006 trip when those on board the Sandra K (and to the dismay of those regulars who weren't) were lucky enough to observe a Great Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*). From the information that is available, this is in all probability the sixth recorded observation of this species in Australian waters, and the second on the east coast. Most of the past sightings of this species in this region have been fleeting, with little opportunity for photographs. This bird, however, followed the boat for almost five hours, allowing very detailed views, becoming probably the most photographed Great Shearwater in history!

It is difficult to mistake Great Shearwaters for another species, especially in Australian waters. They are larger than most other shearwaters, approximately 47cm long and weighing around 800 grams. They have a dark brown cap, a white neck, brown back and wings, with the dark feather fringes giving the impression of a 'scaled look'. There is also a slight white band above the brown tail. The undersides are mostly white, with variable brown markings, including a brown belly patch.

Great Shearwaters are a summer breeder. They commence breeding mid-September, and the young fledge in April. Almost the entire population, estimated at around five million pairs in the 1990s, breed on the Gough/Tristan Islands group, on Nightingale, Gough and Inaccessible Islands. A few hundred pairs also breed in the Falklands. Unlike other seabirds breeding on these islands, such as the Tristan Albatross, most Great Shearwaters in April-May migrate in a northerly direction instead of east-west, spending the winter months in the northern hemisphere. They travel along the North American coast, reaching the Arctic Circle before returning, some via European waters, in August – October.

Dorsal view of the Great Shearwater. The white neck and white band above the tail are clearly evident, as is the 'scaled look' of the back and wings

Frontal view. The brown cap and white neck are key diagnostic features of the Great Shearwater.

in the northern hemisphere. They travel along the North American coast, reaching the Arctic Circle before returning home, some via European waters, in August – October.

It is unknown why a few Great Shearwaters uncharacteristically choose to migrate in an east-west direction, or whether those that take this atypical route manage to return to their breeding grounds. One theory is that they follow other birds, such as albatrosses, instead of the instinctual migration journey taken by the vast majority of their species. Great Shearwaters have however, been recorded in most of the world's oceans, including as far north as California, in the Pacific Ocean.

Recent Wollongong Pelagic Trip Highlights

All reports available from:
http://www.sossa-international.org/Pages/Front%20Pages/PelagicReportsnt.htm

25th March 2006
Kermadec Petrel, Gould's Petrels, White-Necked Petrels, White Tern and Antipodean Albatross.

14th April 2006
Streaked Shearwaters.

22nd April 2006
Great Shearwater, White-Faced Storm Petrel, Brown Skua.

27th May 2006
Northern Royal Albatross, Wandering Albatross (with French Band) and Fairy Prions.

Whatever the reason this Great Shearwater was off Wollongong in April 2006, it was a memorable experience and not from just a mere 'ticking' perspective, for those lucky enough to see this rare sight.

References

Brooke, M. (2004). *Albatrosses and Petrels across the World.* Oxford University Press. New York.

Shirihai, H. (2002). *A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife.* Alula Press: Degerby, Finland.

Ventral view. The brown patches, especially the belly patch are very prominent.

SOSSA's Mystery Bird by Richard Baxter.

Unfortunately, due to other commitments, the answer to Mystery Bird No. 2 was not available in time for this newsletter. The answer for Mystery Bird No. 2, along with Mystery Bird No. 3 will be in the next newsletter.

Mystery Bird No. 3
This photo was again taken in Australian waters. Answers can be emailed to:
mysterybird@internode.on.net

Janice Jenkin OAM, JP, CMCA.

Janice Jenkin-Smith
Photo: L E Smith

Janice has been awarded the prestigious Order of Australia in the 2006 Queen's Birthday Honours list. Born in Wollongong NSW in 1953, Janice has a love of the environment and a passion for nature. She has dedicated much of her life to the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and protection of the environment.

In 1989, Janice was introduced to many more of the "natural treasures" of the Illawarra and the creatures which inhabit it, including the magnificent Wandering Albatrosses and the Hump-backed and Southern Right Whales which can be found close inshore during winter. It was encounters such as these that would change her life forever.

Another interest of Janice's became the nearby "Five Islands" Nature Reserve off Port Kembla, particularly the many seabirds which breed there. Janice has been involved out in the field, often in very harsh weather conditions, catching and tagging Little Penguins, Pelicans, Shearwaters and the endangered Sooty Oystercatchers. Her many tasks have included processing the birds and the data, providing invaluable assistance in the effort to preserve the natural heritage of our unique and endangered coastal islands ecosystems.

Janice's involvement with NSW Albatross Study Group (NSWASG) in 1989 was both timely and fortuitous. Harry Battam, Lindsay Smith and others had taken over this voluntary study, which began in 1956, with the passing of founding pioneers Doug Gibson and Allan Sefton. Janice soon joined the team working at sea, in a very fast 14' foot aluminium boat, working together to catch and tag Wandering Albatrosses almost as large as herself! As seabirds rarely come close to the coast, banding them can be difficult work. The process is carried out in small boats sometimes close to shore, but frequently over Australia's continental shelf, 30 kilometres out to sea. Conditions are often demanding, bruising, cold, harsh, very uncomfortable and usually WET! Janice often found herself returning home with a multitude of bruises due to the extreme difficulty of this pursuit. Despite this, Janice has made many such trips in the role of catcher, photographer or driver.

Janice's persistence and support of SOSSA's studies, appears to have no boundaries, whether being active in the field or the office, participating behind the scenes is Janice's normal way of doing things. She is proud to play any, or all, of the following roles: volunteer; secretary; field worker; hostess; chef; celebrant; Justice of the Peace; and carer. Janice has committed a significant proportion of her life to furthering our knowledge of the world we live in, and has spent countless hours communicating that knowledge to others.

Harry Battam, Janice Jenkin & friend.
Photo: LE Smith

Janice is an outstanding Australian who has been duly recognized for her efforts.

Congratulations Janice! SOSSA is very proud of you !!

Lindsay Smith, Janice Jenkin-Smith & Harry Battam-
photo: Rory McGuinness

Wollongong: Not just for birds

Text and photos by Brook Whylie

Although seabirds are the focus of the Wollongong SOSSA pelagic trips, on most occasions cetaceans are observed. They range from Common Oceanic Dolphins through to Sperm Whales and can be seen throughout the year.

Above: A Common Oceanic Dolphin

Whales are most common June through to September, as Humpback Whales pass through the coastal waters of Wollongong on their northern migration route. During this time they are moving from the Southern Ocean to the warmer waters of Queensland to mate and breed. The numbers of Humpback Whales moving along the New South Wales coast is difficult to estimate, but some studies suggest the numbers to be around 7000.

Below: A Humpback Whale 'spy hopping'.

These majestic creatures can be, at times, quite inquisitive, coming within close proximity of the Sandra K and at other times they disappear without a trace. Each encounter though, is a memorable experience.

FIVE ISLANDS REPORT
Lindsay E Smith

Overall this past breeding season on the islands has been very poor. Sacred Ibis and Australian Pelicans have been relatively successful, though in lower numbers than previous years. The breeding season has been disastrous however for shearwaters.

The Short-tailed shearwaters have faired somewhat better than the Wedge-tailed shearwater, which have had their worst season for many years. The season started poorly with lower numbers of pairs returning to the islands to breed this season. Unfortunately weather conditions prevented us from accessing the islands during the peak arrival of the Wedge-tailed shearwaters in the first two weeks of October. A visit in the third week of November, however, indicated that egg numbers were very low in comparison to typical years. A further visit in mid February found many eggs that had been deserted well before hatching. This was an indication that all was not going too well for the shearwaters. Further visits to the islands in late March and April to band the chicks of the season found that many chicks had died and those that had survived were grossly under weight and would not survive to fledge.

It would appear that a similar scenario occurred at all shearwater colonies currently being studied along the NSW coast. In all a disastrous season for the birds. Perhaps the season will be better next year.

Legendary Coffs Harbour Local, Lorraine Lane, returns to work on Muttonbird Island

Story and photo by Narelle Swanson

Lorraine Lane is still enjoying life and this year she has become part of our weekly day trips in March and April to monitor the growth of the Shearwater Chicks. She is over the moon about going Mutton birding, "It makes me feel young again".

Her past birding experiences with Bill, her late husband, makes her very useful in supplying meaningful titbits of information especially to the many curious island visitors. She can recall that in the 1980's the vegetation was denser over the entire island, and Bill could easily reach his daily tally of banding fifty or more chicks. This supports our observations of the decline in the vegetation and the reduced number of chicks being raised. This season we think we are doing well when we can find five. For those who knew Bill and Lorraine they were a complete dedicated banding team. Bill was interested in banding all kinds of birds, and particularly interested in visiting islands and banding seabirds.

When Bill retired in 1983 they moved from Sydney to a semi bush property at Moonee, Coffs Harbour, which provided them with both bush bird banding sites and nearby Mutton Bird Island for the Shearwaters. Between 1983 and Bill's last visit with us on 23rd October 1997, they made 222 visits to the island and Bill banded over 5000 Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and a few Short-tailed Shearwaters. Lorraine assisted with the recording and holding birds. In the pre computer days, when we used a card system, Bill kept me busy collating all the banding details for the island. Whenever an interesting recovery was made he was on the phone to find out its history. Cards were only made out for an individual bird on its first recovery. There were over 2000 cards before the computer took over, with multiple cards when a bird's band was replaced.

Lorrain and Narelle on Muttonbird Island with a wedge-tailed shearwater chick.

Since Bill's death Lorraine has been out only a few times at night when her grandson Lachlan spent school holidays with her. She has now sold her Moonee property and has a unit at the Masonic Village in Coffs Harbour. She is still very mobile and active driving to the jetty for a beach walk and swim when the weathers fine. She joins in the local bird watching group monthly outings. To quote her recently "My legs are good, my eyesight is good, my hearing is a bit fuzzy but I have good hearing aids, and I try to keep up with what is happening around me".

The Northern Royals of Taiaroa Head

Text and photo's by Brook Whylie

For most southern hemisphere birders viewing albatrosses at-sea is relatively easy with regular pelagic trips run from several locations in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America. Being able to view breeding albatrosses is a much more difficult as, for the most part, albatrosses breed on small, remote islands, mainly in the sub-Antarctic. Trips to these islands, while becoming more common are not for the faint-hearted. Visitors face extreme weather conditions, long voyages, and seasickness, not to mention the cost, so these trips are not for everybody. For those who do want to observe breeding albatrosses though, there is another alternative. There is one place in the world where 'Great' albatrosses breed on a mainland island, in close proximity to a major city. At Taiaroa Head, an easy 40 kilometres drive north-east from Dunedin, the second largest city on New Zealand's South Island, Northern Royal Albatrosses (*Diomedia sanfordi*) have been returning to breed for nearly 100 years.

Northern Royal Albatrosses breed primarily on three islands: The Forty Fours; Big Sister; and Little Sister Islands. These islands form part of the Chatham Islands group, located 800km east of New Zealand. It was only in the early 1900s that Northern Royal Albatrosses were first observed at Taiaroa Head and in 1920 the first laying of an egg there was recorded.

Taiaroa Head has a history of intense human activity, from being a Maori tribal stronghold, a light house site and a military establishment, fortified to protect Otago Habour. Although eggs were laid on a regular basis, it wasn't until 1938 the first albatross fledged, largely due to the intervention of ornithologist Dr L Richdale, who made the decision to live at the nest site to protect the fledgling. Before Richdale took an intense interest in the albatrosses, a combination of human interference or animal predation had consigned every breeding attempt to failure, including the death of the first chick to hatch in 1935. Richdale petitioned the Government, but it wasn't until 1951, after active measures were taken to protect the colony, that it started to expand. Prior to 1972, access to the colony was restricted, but in 1971 the decision was made to allow public viewing and an observatory was built, evolving into the observation platform and education centre in use today.

Taiaroa Head from the seaward (northwest) side. The building on the right of picture is the viewing platform, the white building on the left belongs to the Otago Harbour Port Control. The albatrosses nest on the slope between the two buildings.

Northern Royal Albatrosses primarily range east from New Zealand, across the southern Pacific Ocean and are common in southern South American waters. In 1990, off the coast of Chile a Northern Royal Albatross collided with a fish-

A female Northern Royal on her nest. Note the pipe in the background that forms part of the sprinkler system.

ing trawler, tumbling onto the deck and was taken back to port. A local priest noticed the band on the bird's leg while it was recovering and made contact with the New Zealand Department of Conservation. It was discovered that the bird was a fledging from Taiaroa Head and in 1995, five years after it was released, the albatross arrived back at Taiaroa Head to breed, the first time it had been reported in New Zealand waters since 1987. While Northern Royal Albatrosses are not common in Australian waters, a small number are recorded every year, mostly in southern waters off Tasmania and Victoria. They occasionally are observed off the New South Wales coast, with the most recent record being from the May 2006 SOSSA trip.

Overall, the Northern Royal Albatross population is in serious decline. Since the late 1980s, storms have damaged the breeding grounds in the Chatham Islands, leading to significantly lower breeding success. Also losses to the long-line fishing industry are having significant effects on the population. Experts have predicted a decline in the Northern Royal Albatross population of over 30% within a single generation. Current estimates of Northern Royal Albatrosses are 6500-7000 breeding pairs, with the number at Taiaroa Head representing less than 1% of the population. (continued page 8.)

A Northern Royal off Taiaroa Head. Since 1938, all Northern Royals that fledge from Taiaroa Head have been banded. The coloured bands on the left leg on this Northern Royal are visible.

Generous Donation

SOSSA has received a very generous $10,000 donation from a private family company, who wish to remain anonymous. This single donation will allow us to almost double the number of pelagic research trips conducted over the coming year. The benefits of these additional trips are exponential. They allow us the opportunity to gain greater understanding of the movements of birds and marine mammals along the south eastern seaboard of Australia. They also allow us the opportunity to introduce many more people to the amazing diversity of marine fauna which occur just off our shores.

Many thanks, for this truly generous donation. Perhaps it will encourage others to dig a little deeper to support the research and our natural history.

Lindsay E. Smith OAM (Vice President SOSSA)

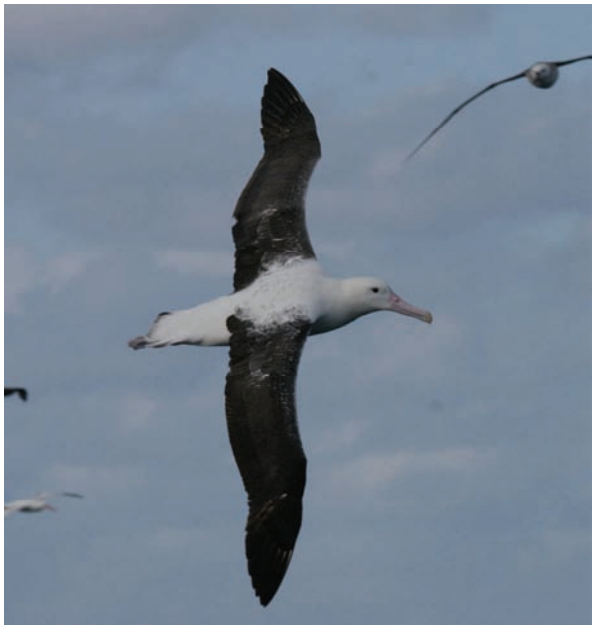
Taiaroa Head from the harbour side. The Observation Centre and Harbour Control are at the top of the hill. The Education Centre can be seen at the bottom right of the hill.

The colony at Taiaroa Head has declined from over 120 birds in the early 1990s to around 100 today showing the same overall trend of decline.

As these birds are biennial breeders (breeding every second year), conservation staff at the centre on Taiaroa Head were expecting 25 pairs to return to breed by November 2005, however, by January 2006 only twenty pairs had arrived, five birds having lost partners since their last breeding attempt. From the twenty pairs that returned, eighteen laid eggs, but only twelve were fertile and in March 2006 it was estimated only 10 will fledge in September 2006. This number is substantially lower than previous years.

The albatrosses returning to breed at Taiaroa Head must also contend with environmental problems. Predators introduced to mainland New Zealand such as cats and stoats have caused ongoing problems, as does a species of blow fly. Climate change may also contribute to their decline: in the late 1980s and early1990s both chicks and adult birds died on nests from heat exhaustion after daytime temperatures reached more than 50 degrees celsius. However conservation staff at the centre are in a position to help and they do have bird 'management' programs in place. Chicks that have lost one of their parents are given supplementary feedings to ensure they have the best chance of survival. Parents with infertile eggs are used as foster parents heat exhaustion, a sprinkler system was installed to help the birds cope with the high temperatures. It has been estimated that these management practices have assisted at least 75 Northern Royal Albatrosses to fledge, an enormous achievement and very significant for the future of the colony.

Below: A Northern Royal photographed from the May 2006 SOOSA trip.



The Northern Royal Albatrosses of Taiaroa Head provide an opportunity for almost everyone to observe an albatross from land. The views of these birds soaring around the headland is truly a unique and unforgettable experience. However, this opportunity should not be taken for granted. The ongoing threats facing the Northern Royals, as with all species of albatross, means that sights such as these could be lost forever without significant and immediate action.

References

http://www.albatross.org.nz/colony.htm

Peat. N and Gaskin. C. (1991) *The World of Albatrosses*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton.

Robertson. C. J. R. (1998) *Factors influencing the breeding performance of the Northern Royal Albatross*. Pg. 98–109 in G. Robertson and R. Gales, eds. *Albatross Biology and Conservation.* Chipping Norton, Australia: Surrey Beatty & Sons.

Interesting banding Recoveries

WANDERING ALBATROSS *Diomedea sp*
Band No 140-38985
First banded 22-08-1976 at Bellambi as a 2-3 year old by S.G.(Bill Lane). NSW Albatross Study Group.
Re-trapped at sea off Wollongong in:
20-08-1977, 09-07-1978, 27-07-1980, 27-08-1983, 28-07-1985 and 01-08-1987.
Re-trapped at sea off Wollongong Sandra K May 28th 2006 making it the 7th time this bird has been re-caught. The island of origin of this bird remain unknown to this day! It has however added greatly to our understanding of plumage development.

WANDERING ALBATROSS *Diomedea exulans*
Band No BS 26167
First banded as a nestling on 17-10-2004 at Kerguelen Islands Antarctiques, France. Latitude 49deg 21min 0sec S. Longitude 70deg 13min 0sec E.
Recovered 27-05-2006 at sea off Wollongong and was also fitted with Australian band No. 140-50534. The bird was released alive with two bands. Time between original banding and recovery is 1 year 7 months 10 days. The bird had moved a distance of 6560km with a bearing of 108 degrees.

BROWN SKUA *Catharacta antarctica lonnbergi*.
Band No 111-20065
First banded at sea off Wollongong 21-08-2005 by SOSSA as a second year or older. Re-captured (tangled in fishing gear) at sea east of South West Rocks NSW and released alive with band. Time between banding and recapture is 0 years 9 months 16 days. The bird had moved a distance of 442 km with a bearing of 27 degrees.

YELLOW-NOSED ALBATROSS *Thalassarche carteri*
Band No 121-40310. First banded 22-07-2000 at sea east of Wollongong as a first year or older, by SOSSA at sea team. Recovered 06-05-2006 at sea east of Eden tangled in fishing gear. Released alive with band. Time between banding and recovery is 5 years 9months and 14 days.
The island of origin of this bird remains unknown.

Well done to all involved.

NEXT SOSSA MEETING

AGM - SOSSA MEETING
10th SEPTEMBER 2006
Sausage Sizzle
held at HQ. – 11.30 am
10 Jenkins Street - Unanderra. NSW.
We only supply the Coffee or Tea!!!

Guest Speaker:
ELIZABETH (LIBBY) HALL
Manager - Veterinary Quarantine and Wildlife Clinic TARONGA ZOO

Libby Hall has long held an interest in Wildlife. Before joining the staff at Taronga Zoo twenty years ago, Libby worked in the field in Sumatra and Malaysia and the famous Bird Park in Singapore.

Libby's position as Veterinary Manager at Toronga Zoo, involves overseeing the rehabilitating of seabirds, a job she has also done in many other locations overseas. Libby has earned international acclaim for her work in rehabilitating seabirds and is a member of the International Oiled Wildlife Team. She has a particular love of Albatrosses!

Libby and her team at Taronga VQ & WC are the people that we turn to when we have need to house, care and rehabilitate marine fauna.

Libby's talk, will be on the rescue and rehabilitation of oiled seabirds, particularly after major oil spills off South Africa and Spain.

New Members…

Frank Valckenborgh
Bevan Miller
Susan Miller
Anne Burgess
David Hill
Bernie Clarke
Ken Josh
Beth Crowley
Ray Bundy
Nick Edards

SOUTHERN OCEAN SEABIRD STUDY ASSOCIATION INC.

SOSSA
c/o Janice Jenkin-Smith
Lindsay Smith
PO Box 142
Unanderra NSW 2526
Australia

Phone: 02 4271 6004
Email: sossa@tpg.com.au

Editors:
Brook Whylie
bwhylie@internode.on.net
Janice Jenkin-Smith
Lindsay Smith
sossa@tpg.com.au
Inger Vandyke
Ingervandyke@hotmail.com

We're on the web!
www.sossa-international.org

Apologies for the delay in getting this newsletter out, the new Editor is on a steep learning curve!! Thanks Mike for all your past efforts in producing it.

The Editor would appreciate all contributions, including photographs of seabirds in Australia, especially from the Wollongong trip. Credit will be attributed to all submissions used.

Due to the delay, membership fees will be now due at the end of JULY instead of June.

PELAGIC DATES 2006

SATURDAY	22nd	JULY
SUNDAY	23rd	JULY
SATURDAY	12th	AUGUST
SATURDAY	26th	AUGUST
SUNDAY	27th	AUGUST

SOSSA AGM
SUNDAY 10th SEPTEMBER 2006
11.30 am AT SOSSA H.Q.

SATURDAY	23rd	SEPTEMBER
SUNDAY	24th	SEPTEMBER
SATURDAY	14th	OCTOBER
SUNDAY	15th	OCTOBER
SATURDAY	28th	OCTOBER
SUNDAY	29th	OCTOBER
SATURDAY	25th	NOVEMBER
SATURDAY	16th	DECEMBER

****

December bought forward 1 week !

Members: $ 65.00
Visitors: $ 80.00

PELAGIC DATES 2007

SATURDAY	27th	JANUARY
SATURDAY	24th	FEBRUARY
SATURDAY	24th	MARCH
SATURDAY	28th	APRIL
SATURDAY	26th	MAY
SATURDAY	23rd	JUNE
SATURDAY	28th	JULY
SATURDAY	25th	AUGUST

SOSSA AGM
SUNDAY 9th SEPTEMBER 2007
11.30 am AT SOSSA H.Q.

SATURDAY	22nd	SEPTEMBER
SATURDAY	27th	OCTOBER
SATURDAY	24th	NOVEMBER
SATURDAY	15th	DECEMBER

****

December bought forward 1 week !

Prices on the web.

Prices may change due to Charter costs !!

SOSSA's newsletter: The Albatross

The Albatross is published four times a year (roughly Jan, Apr, Jul & Oct). The editor welcomes (is desperate for!) articles from members and friends on issues relating to pelagic sea birding, seabird research and marine conservation. Please advise the editor if you intend to submit an article and submit the piece at least two weeks before the start of a publication month. Thank you!

Please send us your email address
To save SOSSA postage costs and receive 'The Albatross' as a colourful pdf or web file then please send your email address and current membership number to the current editor of 'The Albatross': Mike.Double@anu.edu.au

A Wilson's Storm Petrel from the April 2006 SOSSA trip off Wollongong. Photo: Brook Whylie

Please help…
SOSSA membership fees remain unchanged even though costs have increased greatly across the board. We would really appreciate any donations from those whom may be able to afford it.
Thanks again for your support!!