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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Professional and recreational fishers, environmentalists, industry and the community must work hand in hand to ensure that we have sustainable fisheries into the future. We have to value our resources and fight if necessary to protect our heritage for our future generations and our children.

The writing is now on the wall, and we hopefully can see it in time.

In the past century our technology has advanced at such a rate that it has enabled us to bring species to extinction.

We have mined the resource relentlessly, plundering its wealth without thought from the early days of whaling and sealing and later when countless thousands of penguins were killed and rendered for oil.

Perhaps now we are beginning to understand that we cannot keep reaping the harvest if we exhaust the stocks through continued mismanagement.

The Australian Fisheries Management Authority is making a considerable effort to implement the Threat Abatement Plan for seabird by-catch, but has been greatly hindered by the reluctance of the longline industry to realise that it has a problem.

A recent discussion paper suggested that an observer program for the domestic eastern tuna and bill fishery, would be a worthwhile investment. It has the potential to significantly add to our collective and specific knowledge of the resource and its environment.

Presidents Report AGM-AUGUST 2001

It is difficult to follow Harry Battam's glowing account of SOSSA in his president's report for last year, other than to say we are still here and are forging ahead in many ways often not predicted.

In the last year we have come to meet up with David Jones and Ron Tindall, two gentlemen with marketing experience and have great faith in the work that we do. These fellows have forged new links in the chain and are helping disperse the knowledge and understanding of our marine environments and their inhabitants and more importantly helping us in the preparation of grant applications.

Over the past year studies of the Sooty Oystercatcher have continued with the assistance of dedicated SOSSA members and the New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service.

Birding members of the public have been reporting sightings of colour banded birds along the coast. These sightings are giving us an interesting insight into the Sooty Oystercatcher in NSW.

Our studies into the Wedge-tailed Shearwater have also progressed, with the assistance of the interested or bemused public and "Wildlife Cares" reporting lost fledglings and bringing them in to be checked out for condition and general health before being banded prior to release.

Many thanks are due to the Illawarra Yacht Club for the donation of \$500 towards the purchase of a Burrow Scope which will enable us to study burrowing seabirds particularly Little Penguins and shearwaters with a minimum of disturbance.

Once again we have had tremendous support from our veterinary colleagues and rehabilitators!! Many thanks are particularly due to Mike Cannon of Cannon and Ball Veterinary Hospital and Libby Hall from the NRMA rehabilitation clinic at Taronga Zoo for their assistance over this last year.

We have had great support from the Southern Directorate of the NSW NPWS based at Ulladulla and from Geoff Ross (Senior Wildlife Management Officer) NSW NPWS Central Directorate, Ulladulla.

we have experienced some problems interacting with the NPWS, particularly with communication and response to observed unauthorised access to the Five Islands Nature Reserve.

It was hoped that this may have improved after a recent meeting with Adrian Johnstone, acting area manager though this appears not to be the case, as highlighted by the recent incident concerning an injured baby Fur Seal.

On a brighter note is the proposed installation of video cameras by NSW NPWS on the Five Islands. Real time images from these will be available on the NPWS website.

Mike Double is currently setting up a web site for SOSSA and with the assistance of members it is hoped to have this up and running in the near future.

In regard to our studies into the occurrence and abundance of albatrosses along the coast of NSW we are experiencing major problems with the long line fishing industry and it's non-compliance with the Threat Abatement Plan for Albatrosses and Petrels. These matters have been raised with both the industry, through Hans Jusseit executive officer, East Coast Tuna Boat Owners Association, and Andrew McNee and Andy Bodsworth, Australian Fisheries Management Authority.

Generally it would appear that SOSSA is progressing well and we are all looking forward to an exciting and prosperous coming year. I take this opportunity to thank the committee and members for their valued support and assistance over this past year and look forward your assistance over the coming year ahead.

Lindsay E Smith President 2000-2001

Office bearers for 2001-2002

Secretary Chris Brandis
Treasurer Janice Jenkin-Smith
Vice President Harry Battam
Publicity Officer: Peter Andrea
Assistant Secretary: Pam Willetts
Assistant Publicity Officer Janice Jenkin-Smith
Committee Carl Loves, Chris Brandis, P.J. Milburn, Michael Jarman.
Sub-committee

Harry Battam, Lindsay Smith, Janice Jenkin-Smith, John Boness, Peter Andrea, Bob Tomkins, Lee Asthiemer, Bill Buttemer, Alexander Watson, Damien Stanioch, Pam Willetts, Ron Imisides.

Regional representatives

Paul Walbridge to continue as Brisbane Seabirds Study Group's representative to SOSSA.

Dave Stewart to continue as Brisbane Seabirds Study Group's representative to SOSSA.

Operations committee

Michael Jarman, Pam Willetts, Damien Stanioch, Peter Milburn, Mike Double, Bruce Cattle

Honorary members

Damien Stanioch - taxidermy, and assistance in the field.

Carl Loves - boat trips & banding and ongoing interest in seabirds.

Colleen Patterson, for the generous donation of funds.

SURVEY AND MONITORING OF THE BLACK PETREL (*PROCELLARIA PARKINSONI*) ON GREAT BARRIER ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND.

Elizabeth A. Bell and Joanna L. Sim.
Wildlife Management International Limited
PO Box 14-492, Wellington, New Zealand,
wmil@clear.net.nz

The Black Petrel, *Procellaria parkinsoni*, is a vulnerable New Zealand endemic seabird. At about 700g it is the smallest species of its genus. It was once found on mountain ranges throughout the North Island and in the north-west of the South Island. Black Petrels are now known only to occur only on Little and Great Barrier Islands.

Great Barrier Island is the main Black Petrel breeding location. On this island, Black Petrels are generally found in forested areas above 300 metres above sea level, with the key breeding area around the highest point, Mount Hobson (or Hirakimata). The current population estimate for the Black Petrel is 3917 individuals within the 30 hectares around the summit.

Black Petrels breed in summer and then migrate to the eastern tropical Pacific and return to New Zealand to breed in October. They are long-lived burrowing seabirds that lay only one egg each season, have long incubation (c. 57 days) and chick-rearing periods (c. 105 days), with egg laying in November/December. Chicks fledge in May/June and the surviving juveniles return to New Zealand as adults after 4-7 years at sea. Adults usually return annually, though they may not breed each year.

As with many seabirds, the Black Petrel is long-lived and slow to reproduce, which makes it particularly susceptible to any population disturbances. The breeding success of the Black Petrel on Great Barrier Island is affected by introduced rats and cats and dogs in the breeding area, which eat eggs and young chicks. Cats can also attack and kill adults. Breeding is also possibly impacted by domestic and foreign long-line fishing industries.

Black Petrels feed on squid and fish, day and night, but probably mainly by scavenging during the day. They associate with small whales and fishing boats while seeking food, which brings them in conflict with long-line fishing, both commercial and

baits used on long-line vessels, which means birds can be accidentally caught and drowned on fishing lines.

The New Zealand Department of Conservation is concerned at the potential mortality of the Black Petrel in the tuna long-line fishery off north-east New Zealand. As a result a long-term project has been underway on Great Barrier Island since 1996 to assess whether the population is declining. Very little is known about the life history of Black Petrels on Great Barrier and this study aims to provide data to establish current population trends and to determine causes and timing of mortality. As such it requires long-term observations on the population and we are planning to continue this work for at least another season. The costs of this study are recovered from the fishing industry via a Conservation Services levy.

The Black Petrel or Taiko, as its name suggests, is an entirely black seabird except for a pale yellowish, black-tipped bill. It is about the size of large gull (approximately 700g) but has a much wider wingspan adapted for soaring effortlessly far out at sea. On land it is nocturnal, arriving from sea between dusk and dawn. Black Petrels may be seen just before dark flying inland to their breeding place.

With the exception of the breeding season, Black Petrels are usually silent. At night during the breeding season while on the ground males utter a far carrying clacking sound and the females respond from the air.

As the birds breed in heavy forest, they just crash down through the trees when arriving, but climb a tree, protruding rock or other high point such as the summit platform when leaving.

This year was the fourth year that biologists Elizabeth Bell and Joanna Sim (Wildlife Management International Limited) have spent the summer on Great Barrier Island surveying and monitoring the Black Petrel population around Hiramimata. This year they were accompanied by volunteers Karen Lomax, Susan Bettany and Lance Salt.

Fledglings can be disorientated by bright lights and attracted to campsites and other areas of human habitation. If left alone (if they are in a relatively safe place) or moved to a steep clear area they can take off again (handlers need to be aware they have sharp bills and claws). In 2000-2001 both rats and feral cats preyed on some eggs and chicks. Remains of both Cook's and Black Petrels were found eaten by feral cats around the summit.

Another problem facing the petrels (and workers) is the fact that the summit of Great Barrier Island is being used as a public toilet and rubbish dump. Apart from the obvious hygiene problems created, this situation also encourages rats.

This year, despite all the bad news, the petrels seem to have had a successful breeding season. There were 100 chicks in the study area when the "petrel heads" left in February. The team returned in April to band the chicks.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the field staff during this study; all staff from the Great Barrier Island Department of Conservation Area Office; Ian West, Marine and Freshwater Manager and Jacqui Burgess, CSL Program Manager, Department of Conservation, and Brian Bell, Managing Director, Wildlife Management International Limited.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Emergency rule invoked on Hawaiian longline fisheries

The US National Marine Fisheries Service has issued an emergency interim rule designed to prevent by-catch of seabirds by limiting long line fishing near Hawaii by closing fisheries and requiring vessel operators to attend protected species workshops. The rule is effective for 180 days, is applicable to Hawaiian long line vessels and designed to reduce by-catch of Short-tailed Albatrosses and sea turtles.

Advanced sensor technology deployed to enhance fisheries protection effort

The Operations Manager of the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI), has today announced that he is using advanced technology made available by Britain's DERA (Defense Evaluation and Research Agency) to enhance existing GSGSSI fisheries protection capabilities. State-of-the-art sensor technologies will be deployed for the first time during June and July 2001, in a determined bid to combat any attempted illegal fishing activity in a 400,000 square kilometer area seas around South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. GSGSSI has tasked sensors and electronics experts from DERA to augment the technology at the disposal of fisheries patrol vessels, thus considerably enhancing their capability to intercept vessels operating without valid fishing permits.

Historic agreement to protect albatrosses and petrels

On 19 June 2001, an historic international Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels was signed today by Federal Environment Minister Robert Hill, committing Australia to an international effort to protect albatrosses and petrels.

The agreement, also signed by ambassadors and high commissioners from Brazil, Chile, France, New

major step in the fight to protect these migratory seabirds. It is designed to provide countries from around the world with the information and techniques vital to protect these severely threatened birds. A number of other countries are expected to also sign this agreement, which seeks to achieve and maintain a favorable conservation status for albatrosses and petrels, particularly in the Southern Hemisphere. Australia initiated the agreement in 1997. It is the first international agreement to clearly focus on an integrated and holistic approach to albatross and petrel conservation, and contains guidelines for albatross and petrel conservation throughout the Southern Hemisphere to better coordinate conservation actions on land and at sea.

Short-tailed Albatross

Dr. Hiroshi Hasegawa of Toho University, Chiba, Japan reports the following status of the Short-tailed Albatross.

In early March 2001 on Minami-kojima [25°56' N, 123°42'E] in the Senkaku Islands there were 24 chicks and a total of 79 adult/immature. The population increased here from 7 chicks in 1987-88. There are now about 40 nesting pairs (170 individuals including pre-breeders), giving an estimated population for the Senkaku Islands of about 200 birds.

The breeding on Torishima success in the 1999-2000 season was 73% (238 pairs nested), the highest in recent years and in 2001 there were 173 chicks. The total size of the Torishima population is now about 1300 birds. This gives a world population estimate of some 1500 Short-tailed albatross.

Seabird by-catch in New Zealand fisheries

The following document is available for downloading from the New Zealand Department of Conservation web site: 'Report on the International Fishers' Forum on Solving the Incidental Capture of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries'. URL is:

http://www.doc.govt.nz/whats/issues/fishers_forum.htm

FIVE ISLANDS REPORT

Lindsay E Smith

SOSSA has recently had discussions with the NSW NPWS, both at area and regional levels. We are hoping that the Five Islands will now receive funding to continue the re-vegetation program and maintain the Consett Davis Hut. It is hoped also that there will be a useful response to calls for assistance when there are people on the Island.

The Port Kembla Royal Volunteer Coast Guard flotilla have been of great assistance in maintaining 24 hour / 365 days surveillance for the islands and we thank them for their past and expected future vigilance.

We have had discussions with specialist bush-regenerator Danie Ondinea and her group. They are

We are working with the NSW National parks and Wildlife Service to install and commission the video cameras and some data acquisition instrumentation on Big Island. This exciting innovation will enable us to share the islands and the activities of their inhabitants with the world, and should greatly improve our ability to gather data.

The Wedge-tailed Shearwaters had an apparently productive breeding season. For the marked burrows data analysis is incomplete, but breeding success appears to be very high. A number of fledglings were found "lost on their initial flight" in overcast conditions with scattered showers. A number of birds were handed to SOSSA for banding prior to release, most being found in the industrial area, probably attracted to the bright lights. The majority of birds came from the Wildlife Information Rescue Service "WIRES" and we thank them for their assistance.

Little Penguin numbers were down alarmingly on August 7th when Fran, Oliver, and Guy Prince visited the island with Lindsay. Only 5 adult birds were captured and there was no indication that breeding had begun.

The Silver Gulls had not laid with the exception of one egg in one nest. There were however many completed nests. Once again a late season possibly due to the warm water currents or lack of food.

" ON THE HOOK "

Ross Hunter

We still await the yellow-fin tuna. Where are they? Is it because the water temps are still in excess of 22°C on the shelf? Or is it a cycle that these most sought after sport fish have declined beyond belief over the past 4 or five seasons? Or is it perhaps that the longline fishermen are demonstrating how badly they can manage their industry and our fish stocks by over fishing our oceans of yellow-fin tuna just as the blue-fin tuna have been decimated. The latest reports from the governing body, Australian Fisheries Management Authority shows a decline in species such as broadbill swordfish, yellow-fin and big-eye tuna.

If we are to believe that such reports are accurate are we to assume that longline fishermen will now concentrate on our striped marlin. Are these to be the next species in decline? If these fish were whales, the world would be in an uproar. To us charter fishermen the yellow-fin and marlin, are important to the welfare of our business. Whilst, we tag and release the majority of these fish we are not going to stand by and watch our stocks disappear from over fishing as we have done in the past. We need to manage our oceanic species with more skill and more thought for the future. I suggest it is time for drastic changes and more control on long

lining before it's too late. Come on fisheries, both state and federal, we paid our licenses, let's see some action.

We live in hope that some yellow-fin will be caught this season. I guess we just have keep trying the wide grounds from time to time. Until then you will find Broadbill and Billfisher fishing the snapper grounds a little more than normal.

Broadbill and Billfisher are available for charter on 9534 2378 www.gamefishingcharters.com.au



A SPECTACULAR DISAPPOINTMENT

by Mike Double (ANU, SOSSA)
& Peter Milburn (SOSSA)

In 1907 the *Dundonald* was sailing from Sydney to London when it was wrecked on a small subantarctic island. Sixteen of her 28 crew survived only to find that nine kilometers of treacherous open sea separated them from a whaling depot and rescue. For seven months the crew ate albatross chicks and seals until they hatched a plan to build a boat and sail to the main island.

The *Dundonald* had been wrecked on the aptly named Disappointment Island. This island, with the larger Adams, Auckland and Enderby Islands, makes up the Auckland Island group which lies about 460 kms south of New Zealand's South Island. The albatrosses that sustained the crew of the *Dundonald* for so long, were White-capped Albatrosses (*Thalassarche steadi*) and today something like 72, 000 pairs nest on the 392 hectares of Disappointment Island. Since the wrecking of the *Dundonald* few people have set foot on Disappointment Island and still very little is known about the island or it's albatrosses.

White-capped Albatrosses are extremely similar to Australia's Shy Albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*) and it was a contentious suggestion to elevate these albatrosses to species status (Robertson & Nunn 1998). Regardless, it is thought that large number of both species are caught in long-line and trawl fisheries and it was asked whether genetics may be able to identify the provenance (island of origin) for all Shy-type birds killed during

observers. To do this we needed blood samples from all populations of Shy and White-capped Albatrosses including the colonies on Disappointment Island.

Months of planning began. Cathryn Abbott, a Ph.D. student at the Australian National University headed the team. We needed money, people and permits. Funding applications were submitted to numerous agencies and thankfully Environment Australia, the Australian Research Council, Birds Australia, and the Winifred Violet Scott Foundation thought that the project was worthy of funding.

New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DOC) Pete Mc Clelland in particular, held our hands through the quagmire of paperwork and with considerable relief the go-ahead was given. With the permits and funding in place we needed to find suitable people for the expedition. New Zealanders Jacinda Ames, Gus Mc Allister and Ian Flux have done an astounding amount of remote, often Subantarctic, fieldwork and, along with Peter Milburn (SOSSA), have handled innumerable albatrosses. All readily offered their services and so with Cathryn and myself we had our team.

Disappointment, Auckland and Adams all have breeding populations of White-capped Albatrosses but Disappointment's is by far the largest. From the beginning we knew that samples from Disappointment would be crucial but landing on the island was going to be tough. Disappointment is a small island on the windward side of the Auckland Is. and is fully exposed to a stormy region of the Southern Ocean known as the Furious Fifties. The weather would have to be very kind to us, to even attempt a landing.

At 20:00hrs on the 27th of February we set sail on board the *Marine Countess* from a small port on the southern tip of the New Zealand's South Island. Looking back at Bluff Harbour I hoped for a patch of uncharacteristically calm weather which, for the trip down at least, is what we got. Cruising across the glassy waters of the Foveaux Strait we were treated to views of New Zealand fur seals, Stewart Island Cormorants, rafts of Sooty Shearwaters and the occasional Buller's Albatross. After a sedate night we emerged on deck to see the Roaring Forties purring gently! We sunbathed on deck as White-capped, Northern and Southern Royal, Buller's and Gibson's Albatrosses cruised by. I had my first ever views of Mottled and White-chinned Petrels. Amongst the numerous Common Diving Petrels was a lone South Georgian Diving Petrel. To Milburn at least this bird appeared so obviously different that he dispelled the myth that these two species are impossible to identify at sea! Other seabirds

Fulmar (2) Prions, Cape Petrels (2) and a Subantarctic (Little) Shearwater. In the deeper water to the south of the Snares Plateau, a number of the southern form of Fairy Prion were seen. Additionally, we saw several Campbell Albatrosses and the only Cook's Petrel of the voyage. Groups of dusky dolphin rode the bow-wave from time-to-time and a massive bull sperm whale surfaced close to the ship.

Clement weather stayed with us all day but the forecast ruled out a landing on Disappointment. Instead, we spent the night safely anchored at Port Ross, Enderby Island. Common Diving and white-headed petrels were attracted to the ship's lights along with White-fronted Terns and moth-like Grey-backed Storm Petrels. During the night we headed down the east coast of Auckland Island to Carnley Harbour. From there we could access the White-cap colonies on both Adams and Auckland while anchored in the relatively sheltered waters of this spectacular natural harbour.

After a morning waiting for the wind and rain to ease we landed on Auckland and started the slippery trek to the White-cap colony on South West Cape. Reaching the colony we looked down at steep cliffs powdered with albatross chicks. Some 3000 pairs nest on South West Cape and we needed to sample as widely as possible to get a reasonable idea of the genetic variation at this site. After a few hours of clambering about the sodden cliffs we had all the samples needed. Sadly, we also saw first hand the impact of feral pigs on the island (Flux 2001). At one point a family group of pigs trotted away, the adult chewing on the head of an albatross chick and a piglet carrying the chick's foot. We slowly returned to the *Countess* staggering in the 40 – 60 knot winds!

Shivering on deck, we washed and disinfected our gear then savoured the warmth of the galley and the mountain of food prepared by the crew. A landing on Disappointment was still out of the question so the Logan's Point colony on Adams Island had to be next. A steep hike up and over Adams the next day gave us our first sight of the windward side of the Auckland Islands. Immense vertical cliffs plummeted down into the boiling waves below. Waterfalls reached for the sea but were blown back on to the land by the cliff's updraught. Gibson's Albatrosses were incubating on the plateau and all around were the cries of Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses. There are no pigs on Adams so the megaherb flora, characteristic of New Zealand's subantarctics, flourishes. Adams Island is truly an amazing and

A steep descent at Logan's Point put us among the 50 or so pairs of White-caps that make up this small isolated colony. Jacinda and Ian roped themselves down to a lower tier of nests while Gus and myself sampled the more accessible chicks. We soon had our samples so with time to spare we slowly walked back to the *Countess*, enjoying the improving weather and savouring our brief time on Adams. Besides the albatrosses, bellbirds, tomtits, New Zealand falcons, Auckland Island snipe, Auckland Island Shag, Brown Skuas, Cape and White-headed Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters and Hooker's sea lions were common.

Only one place left to go – Disappointment. Late on the 2nd March we moved east along Carnley Harbour ready for our early morning exit. We'd then sail west along the south coast of Adams and then turn north up the exposed west coast of Auckland Island. About 02:00, tucked in our bunks, the crashing of the westerly swell against the hull of the *Countess* told us we'd left Carnley. To the inexperienced it felt rough but the crew thought nothing of it, they'd definitely had it much much worse. At first light the boat was still pitching and rolling heavily but Disappointment Island was dead ahead nestled in the low cloud. Clinging to my bunk, hoping the sea-sickness pills would do their magic, I cautiously dressed and slowly made my way to the bridge. Our potential landing point was Castaway Bay, the same place the crew of the *Dundonald* had launched their make-shift coracle. It looked grim but the crew of the *Countess* were prepared to give it a go. Initially, we'd land four people so everyone could be evacuated in a single boatload if need be. So Cath, Gus, Jacinda and Ian staggered about squeezing into their wetsuits. No arguments from me. Even though I'd thought about Disappointment Island for months the pills hadn't yet done their job and I just couldn't move. Milburn came to the rescue with tea and toast and thankfully the pills kicked in. Gus wasn't so fortunate but was still prepared to jump in the tinnie with the others.

The *Countess* had now edged further into Castaway Bay and we'd lost much of the swell. The rain, too, was beginning to ease. Fully loaded the tinnie raced away and disappeared into the mist.

The crew soon returned with huge smiles and urged Milburn and I to get ready. Within ten minutes we too had landed safely, deep in Castaway Bay. No-one knew how long the weather would hold so we had to move quickly. Gus and Jacinda set off for the far colonies at the

west of the island while Cath and Ian headed south.

Milburn and I sampled colonies to the north. A Hooker's sea lion roared up out the tussocks as we climbed to the colonies and a flightless Auckland Island Teal scuttled away through the undergrowth. In among the White-caps, White-chinned Petrels landed and ran over our feet into their burrows. Brown Skuas and Gibson's Albatrosses were nesting high on the plateaus away from the bustle of the White-caps. But the spectacle of the thousands upon thousands of nesting White-caps was most breathtaking. Every windward slope was dotted endlessly with fluffy white skittle-like chicks. With our sampling complete Milburn and I sat and tried to absorb the scene. In the distance - the foreboding cliffs of Auckland Island, nearer - the *Countess* safely anchored in the easing waters of Castaway Bay, and the sky thick with White-capped Albatrosses and White-chinned Petrels. We knew we'd never be here again, we had to take it all in while we could.

Eventually the others returned to our landing site; everyone in awe of this incredible place. Leaving the glassy waters of Castaway Bay we could hardly believe our luck. We had collected all the samples we'd need in just three days. Before they successfully sailed to the whaling station on Auckland I bet the crew of the *Dundonald* must have waited weeks for seas like these.

Acknowledgments

This trip would not have been possible without the skill and expertise of the *Marine Countess* (Mick, Nash, Roger and Tony), we cannot thank them enough.

Flux, I. A. (submitted) New Zealand White-capped Mollymawk chicks eaten by pigs. *Notornis*.

Robertson, C. J. and Nunn, G. B. (1998) In *Albatross biology and conservation*(Eds, Robertson, C. and Gales, R.) Surrey Beatty & Sons, Chipping Norton, pp. 13-19.



Lazing on deck of the *Marine Countess* in the 'Roaring Forties'

Below: A White-capped Albatross and chick above Castaway Bay, Disappointment Island. The west coast of Auckland Island can be seen in the distance.



Photographs: Mike Double

ALBATROSS - NSWASG Report

Wollongong

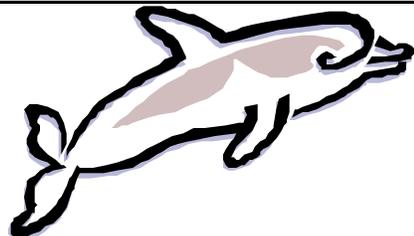
The sea current patterns this season have been most unusual with the water temperatures along the continental east of Wollongong being greater than 22°C. This is 5-6° greater than usual and may explain the very low numbers of birds, particularly albatrosses this year.

Inshore the cuttlefish spawn was short and irregular, most male mortality occurring in late June, before the arrival of the wanderers. In this season only 3 *Diomedea* albatrosses were captured off Wollongong, the lowest number in 45 years.

Bateman's Bay

As for Wollongong this season has been a very poor one with very few albatrosses this winter.

Whales, Dolphins Seals and other Sea Monsters



CAPE SOLANDER WHALE WATCH AND OTHER SNIPPETS.

Geoff Ross, Wildlife Management Officer, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Mike Jarman.

Whale Watch Coordinator, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service

Seven-hundred and fifty whales were counted by volunteers from Cape Solander, Botany Bay National Park between May 25 and July 31 this year. Of the 750 recorded, 723 were humpbacks *Megaptera novaeangliae*.

Dedicated volunteers, including the legendary whale watcher Wayne Reynolds, spent the daylight hours looking for the sometimes, elusive humpback whales. Some of the whales passed by extremely close offering spectacular views to the eager whale watchers. As they passed many were observed performing characteristic displays such as tail slapping, pectoral slapping and head slapping. For the dedicated whale watcher the humpbacks offered extra delights by breaching. On a number of occasions this year double breaching was observed, whereby two whales synchronize their expulsion from the ocean exposing their underbellies and, returning to the water create an enormous splash.

Over 30 volunteers have signed up to help with the whale watching this year adding to the data collected over the last four years. Last year 556 whales were counted passing Cape Solander, this year 721 were counted between the May 25 and the July 25. The count has been increasing each year since 1997 when volunteer Wayne was the lone observer of the migrating beasts. The increase in sightings could be attributable to a number of factors. An increase in population size is the most pleasant hypothesis, but it is more likely that the numbers of whales migrating up the coast varies from year-to-year. It is also possible that some whales migrate further out to sea. The data is consistent and provides an index of humpback movement.

Also of interest, was the number of southern right *Balaena glacialis* and Minke *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* whales seen off the Cape this season. Twenty-five minke and two southern right whales were counted during the season with an additional three southern rights passing after the count dates, one of these, a young male spent 4 days in Botany Bay.

Whale watching has become one of the boom ecotourism industries in the world today with an estimated 10 million people partaking last year. The beauty of Cape Solander is that observation of these magnificent creatures can be undertaken from shore thus being much less intrusive than watching from a boat. The whales pass Cape Solander between late May and early August with the peak in late June. If you visit the park in June we can almost guarantee you will see a whale.

With the increase in the abundance of whales off

entanglement or stranding. An unidentified cetacean (probable minke) was disentangled from buoy line by the Botany Bay Water Police in late July and sadly a mature male pygmy sperm whale *Kogia breviceps* stranded on Cronulla beach at 2100 hours on July 27. Individual strandings are difficult and commonly result in the death or euthanasia of the animal.

The result of my initial examination of the Cronulla animal revealed that among other injuries it had a broken lower jaw. When a veterinary assessment by Taronga veterinary staff confirmed my initial diagnosis all concerned felt that euthanasia was the best option under the circumstances. The *Kogia* was euthanised and a post mortem conducted the following morning. A number of important tissue samples were taken some of which will be forwarded to New Zealand where a post-graduate student is currently working on the taxonomy of this genera.

Other sightings of interest

Pilot whales were seen on 11 August 2001, approximately 25nm east of Sydney. Water temp 21.5°C degrees. They were in groups, of ten or more individuals They were spread out over an extensive area. There appeared to be 10 or more groups indicating an overall count in the order of 100 -200 animals.

Steve Anyon-Smith

Pygmy-killer whales *Feresa attenuata*

Two pods of pygmy killer whales were observed in the vicinity of the continental shelf east of Wollongong on 11 August 2001. One pod contained about 10-12 animals the other 15-20. Water temperature ranged 19.6–21.8°C.

A pod of 10+ pygmy killer whales were observed in the same area 24 November 2000.

A single large sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus* was observed from the Sandra K in 600 fathoms east of Wollongong on 4 August 2001.

Southern right whales *Eubalaena australis* have been observed close inshore off Wollongong and Sydney in small but increasing numbers.

Wollongong pelagic, Lindsay Smith.

VISITORS to SOSSA

Prince family from England, It was terrific to see Francis, Oliver and Guy again. We last caught up with the Prince family in 1995 when they visited with Peter to attend the 1st International Albatross Conference in Hobart Tasmania. Unfortunately Peter died unexpectedly on 25 February 1998, it is nice to see that our friendship with his family has endured. We're glad they enjoyed their stay. Thank you to everyone for your assistance in showing them the Australian way of life.

Chris Robertson from New Zealand

Chris is one of the foremost albatross biologists in the world today and a key player in our understanding of albatrosses (Towards a new taxonomy of the albatrosses, Robertson & Nunn 1995). We were indeed fortunate to have a visit from Chris particularly as we almost lost him to a very nasty flesh-eating infection just twelve months ago. We are happy to say that he is in excellent health and has weathered his unbelievable ordeal extremely well.

It was great to catch up and discuss the myriad of things relating to albatrosses, including the new taxonomy and the advances made by the long line fishing industry in an attempt to mitigate the incidental by-catch of albatrosses and petrels.

We managed to get Chris out on the Sandra K for a spot of 'sea-birding' and to discuss progress made in the "at sea" identification of albatross species included by the new taxonomy. We were able to demonstrate some new methods used to capture *Diomedea* and *Thalassarche* albatrosses at sea. It was also interesting to point out to Chris differences in the plumage characteristics of various age classes of albatrosses at sea. This experience is usually missed by researchers on breeding grounds, as most albatrosses remain at sea until several years of age, where they undergo a sequence of moults before attaining adult plumage.

