



The Albatross

**SOUTHERN OCEAN
SEABIRD STUDY
ASSOCIATION INC.**

Issue No. 55

July 2015

Banded Gibson Albatross Recovery

Special points of interest:

- Gibson Albatross band recovery
- Leatherback Turtle in the Illawarra
- Black Petrels in the western Tasman Sea
- Wedge-tails return to Muttonbird Island

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A banded Gibson's Albatross was photographed on the March 2015 Port Stephens pelagic. Below is the response from the New Zealand researcher who attached the band.

Giddy Mick

We received a report of a sighting you made of one of "our" albatrosses off Port Stephens. I've sent the details back through the NZ and Aus banding offices, but just in case they never get to you, here's the details of the birds.

The bird Red-56g, metal band R-47562 was banded in our study area on Adams Island in the Auckland Islands on 17/2/1993. It was an adult incubating an egg when we banded it. She's a girl. Since then she's bred 11 times and was doing very well up until 2005

and she raised 6 chicks from 8 nesting attempts with the same partner, but since 2005 she has had two new partners and not succeeded in her 3 nesting attempts. This is consistent with what has happened with both gibsonii and antipodensis whose populations and productivity have crashed since 2005 – we've only got half of the birds we used to have, and they struggle to raise chicks.

We last saw her on Adams Island on 25/1/14 on a nest. The nest failed so we would have expected her back in 2015, but she wasn't there – at least we know she was still alive.

Regards

Graeme Elliott



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Fauna and Marine Parks Association Inc.



New Gould's Petrel T-Shirt available

Hunter-based designer, Alison Green, has recently produced a design for a Gould's Petrel t-shirt. SOSSA member Mick Roderick, first came up with the idea because the nominate race of the Gould's Petrel was (at the time!) an endemic breeding taxon on islands off the Hunter coastline – the vast majority of the population still breeds on Cabbage Tree Island, which was the site of one of the most successful seabird breeding recovery efforts in NSW, led by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. We now know that some Gould's Petrels breed on the islands off the south coast of NSW (e.g. Montague Island).



The Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC) has teamed with Alison Green to raise money for research on breeding seabirds on the Port Stephens offshore breeding islands. Alison has kindly offered to donate \$17 from every sale of a Gould's Petrel shirt made between now and the end of August. The shirts are \$42 and are in one style/colour only, which depicts the bird in flight with Cabbage Tree Island in the background, as well as an image of a bird next to a burrow. Mick Roderick will be bringing a batch of shirts down to the AGM in August, so you can buy one then, or visit Alison's website, where you can see the colour/style <http://tinyurl.com/oh4afha> (note that the \$5 mentioned on her website will be an ongoing donation from her after the end of August). HBOC will be supplementing Alison's donations with fundraising at their August club night, where Gould's Petrel researcher Yuna Kim will be speaking about her studies on this amazing seabird.

PELAGIC REPORTS

******* Please note *******

Pelagic reports will no longer be printed with the newsletter.

You will need check the reports on the web site .

DONATIONS



Thank you to the people below for their very kind donations.

Donations are integral to allowing the continuation of the valuable work on our precious wildlife. So thanks again to:

Roslyn Hanson

The Big Turtle

By Lindsay Smith

A large Leatherback Turtle could not be saved after being washed ashore on to rocks at Shellharbour, south of Wollongong NSW, on March 22nd 2015. The efforts of local volunteers to save the turtle, thought to be a large female, were unsuccessful.

It was first reported by a local fisherman who identified it as Leatherback Turtle. It was close inshore just beyond the breakers off a local surfing spot known as Cowrie Island or Cowries. The turtle appeared to be unable to submerge and in a distressed state. The fisherman reported his sighting to Australian Seabird Rescue (ASR), Betty Spilsted from the ASR "Turtle Team" contacted SOSSA HQ to notify us that a Leatherback Turtle was in trouble at Shellharbour, "could I assist?" I immediately contacted Senior Wildlife Management Officer Marine Fauna Geoff Ross requesting assistance of the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NP&WS) to help in the recovery of this very rare and critically injured animal. Transport to Taronga Wildlife Clinic was to be organised.

NP&WS officers who were quickly on site were unable to locate the turtle later that afternoon due to fading light. The following morning a member of the Shellharbour Surf Life Saving Club reported that the turtle was found washed ashore on the rocks just north of Cowrie Island. The woman said that she had contacted the NP&WS and local council, reporting that the turtle had been washed up.

This was my first encounter with such a rare and little known giant sea turtle, a "Sea Monster" of old. It had washed ashore overnight, becoming stranded on the rock platform and died.



The Leatherback Turtle. Photo: Lindsay Smith

Over the past 30+ years I have been involved in many sea turtle rescues. I was not prepared though for what lay here at my feet. A sea turtle of massive size, being over 1.7 metres long, with front flippers spanning more than 2 metres and estimated to weigh over 250 kilograms! This was a sea turtle unlike any I had ever encountered, a Leatherback Turtle, *Dermochelys coriacea*.

The carapace or shell of the turtle, instead of consisting of a number of large scutes (plate like scales), was a smooth thick black leathery skin with a series of seven prominent longitudinal ridges above (including the outer lateral pair) and four ridges along the plastron. This carapace appeared almost too small to contain the bulging shoulders of the fore flippers and the broad hips of the rear flippers. The eyes of the animal appeared quite small in the large head and appeared to have cataracts or a greyish gunk covering the pupil.

Continued on page 4

From page 3, 'The Big Turtle' continued.

The left fore flipper had a small hole in it approximately 1.5cm in size, the right rear flipper had a similar piercing. The position of these small holes may indicate that this animal may have been tagged at some previous time and over time (possibly many years) at sometime the tags have degraded or been lost.

A network of volunteer's authorities and local council workers worked together to retrieve the animal from the rocks and transported it to the centre for Wildlife Health and Diseases at Taronga Zoo to undergo an autopsy to determine the cause of death. Plastic bags had blocked the poor animals' stomach which had caused gases to build up in it, causing bloating. This prevented it from submerging. This inability to submerge led to the animal possibly being stuck by a boat causing severe tissue and trauma to the animals' right shoulder and neck. The animal has since been buried at a secret location and will be exhumed at a later date. The specimen will be housed in the Australian Museum in Sydney.



Left: The turtle being removed from the rocks.
Photo: Lindsay Smith.



Right. The turtle prior to being removed.
Photo: Betty Spilsted

The Black Petrel in the western Tasman Sea.

By Lindsay E. Smith.

The Black Petrel was first described *Procellaria parkinsoni* (G.R. Gray, 1862. Ibis (1) 4: 245) It was named in honour of Sydney Parkinson 1745-1771, draughtsman to Sir Joseph Banks on HMS 'Endeavour'.

The only Australian specimen was collected in May 1875 from north of Sydney Heads N.S.W. (G. Masters Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W. 1940). This specimen (B4431) is currently housed in the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney. No further specimens are known to have been collected from Australian waters.

The Black Petrel was considered to be an accidental vagrant in Australian waters. (T.R. Lindsey 1986). Over one hundred years after its initial discovery, two Black Petrels were observed and photographed at sea off Sydney in December 1983 (A McBride and others, pers com).

E.S. Hoskin et. al. Birds of Sydney 1770 - 1989 2nd ed.1991 p22 has as observations, 4 birds off Sydney Heads "probably followed the flocks of Short-tailed Shearwaters returning to breed on islands in Bass Strait and elsewhere", although no date is given. It then goes on with the following dates of occurrence, one on November 26th 1983, two on October 27th 1984, one November 24th 1984 and two April 27th 1985.

Since these early occurrences, the Black Petrel has been regularly recorded and photographed from many pelagic sea birding trips along the N.S.W. coast during late Spring - Autumn (Oct-April). Interest in pelagic seabirds and other marine fauna has increased greatly since the late 1960's, with the number of competent observers and dedicated pelagic trips along the Australian east coast increasing greatly as well.



Photo: Frank Valckenborgh Dec 15th 2012. Note: Distended belly may indicate the presence of an unlaidd egg.

Pelagic trips are now (or have run) run from Southport and the Sunshine Coast in South-east Queensland, south to Port Stephens, Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong, Kiama, Ulladulla and Eden in N.S.W to Eaglehawk Neck in Southern Tasmania. This has enabled the collection of more data on the numbers distribution and movements of birds in the western Tasman and south-east Coral Seas. Improved and specialised "Field Guides" along with the advent and development of digital cameras have also assisted in the identification of seabirds. This in turn allows a greater understanding of the complex plumage development and replacement, which in turn assisting in ageing individual birds. All these factors contribute to more sightings of Black Petrels, which indicate they are more common in Australian waters than previously thought, with sightings becoming more frequent in recent years.

Banding studies have been conducted from the Sandra K since 1984 to present day. During this time the Black Petrel has been recorded on numerous occasions with all sightings being reported between Oct-March, with most being reported in December (max of five together). (LES per obs).

Continued page 6.

The Black Petrel in the western Tasman Sea—continued from page 5.

The SOSSA banding team, since 1991, has banded sixteen Black Petrels. These include re-capturing one previously banded as a chick at the breeding station on Great Barrier Island, New Zealand.

The Black Petrel is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, with the total world population being estimated to be around 5000 individuals.

The Black Petrel is highly migratory. Adults and fledglings range east to South America and north to the Galapagos Islands after breeding in New Zealand. They later return westwards, perhaps following the South Equatorial Current or travelling south-west to their breeding islands.

Description: the Black Petrel is the smallest and most northerly occurring of the Procellaria Petrels (similar in size to the Grey-faced Petrel). It is a large solidly built, sleek looking all dark petrel with a rounded head and relatively short, thick neck. The bill is large, pale yellowish-horn coloured with a dark unguis (tip). The tubes of the nostrils turn paler with age. The legs and feet are black and extend beyond the wedge shaped tail in flight.

Generally solitary at sea. In our region the Black Petrel most often occurs beyond the continental shelf waters. Here it appears to have a preference for blue water 18.0°-26.3°C. It often attends fishing trawlers to feed on discards. Black Petrels will actively hover over the wake of the vessel, thereby allowing the pale bill and black legs to be easily seen.

Associated species: The Black Petrel has been observed feeding with Shearwaters and Petrels including Wedge-tailed, Short-tailed, Sooty and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, as well as Solander's, Grey-faced, (NZ Great-winged Petrels) and Westland Petrels. The above species occur regularly in our waters during summer. Black Petrels have been sighted in mixed flocks of birds attracted to chum.



Westland Petrel & Flesh-footed Shearwater. Photo: Raja Stephenson.

All of the above species may be confused by the novice or casual observer. White-chinned Petrels (many have little or no white on the chin) and Westland Petrels are most problematic. Some Flesh-footed Shearwaters can approach the Black Petrel in size and structure so observers should always check foot colour!

From birds observed and/or photographed at sea from October to April, many birds appear to be in fresh plumage, sooty brown/black. The head often appears darker than body. The underwings show a frosted silver bloom which can appear quite pale in some lights. The plumage fades to brown as it wears. Birds with well worn plumage are likely to be confused with other species. Moulting of primaries or rectrices has not been noted in any birds from our region. This would indicate that the majority of such moulting takes place in the eastern tropical Pacific shortly after arriving there.

Specimens collected by R.H.Beck in May and June 1906 were in the process of a complete renewal of plumage. Loomis 1918.

To view more images see Raja Stephenson's web site, <http://www.adarman.com/>

Further reading;
Imber M.J. 1987, Notornis 34 part 1; 19-39
Lindsey, T.R. 1986 The Seabirds of Australia
Loomis L.M. Proc.Calif. Acad.Sci.Ser. 4,2: 1-187.

Welcome back Pigface and Nina to Muttonbird Island (Coffs Harbour NSW) Text and photos by Narelle Swanson

With the help of interested locals since 2000 I have been monitoring the progress of each seasons Wedge-tailed Shearwaters chicks, as they grow from balls of down in January till they are ready to fly in April/May. This season we recovered 'Pigface', band number 16277172, about 60 metres up the path from where it was banded in April 2009. On the same night we recovered another bird, 'Nina', banded as a chick in April 2011.

Each season a few burrows close to the path have been selected and the chicks weighed regularly sometimes twice a week depending the on weather. There can be problems with people using the island trampling burrows close to the path and being inquisitive about marked burrows. Originally we identified burrows with tags and recorded numbers like T41. Identification evolved into giving the birds nicknames, with some related to the location of the burrow. This has been much easier to remember, and to keep records of individuals as not all birds have survive to be banded. Pigface came from a very short shallow burrow near some succulent vine *Carpobrotus glaucescens* commonly called pigface. The burrow was given a bit of

restructuring with a board inserted in the roof and a bit of sideways extensions just so a full grown bird would fit. This ensured it survived some very wet periods that occurred that season. Its tail sometimes stuck out out of the burrow and got wet, but mostly it stayed dry. Our reroofing technique of a scrappy bit of old masonite with soil on top for the vegetation to grow over has worked well for many burrows.

Pigface was first found on the 19th January weighing 70g it was probably at least 5 days old. It had reached 270g by 1st February and the maximum weight recorded was 550g on 17th March. In all it was weighed 18 times. During the day of 15th April it's weight was 450g and it probably fledged that evening.

Pigface could be described as a very co-operative happy individual. It almost seemed that it liked being photographed from its downy stage in February till its last time as a fully feathered bird in April.



Left and below, Pigface in February.



Welcome back Nina and Pigface to Muttonbird Island continued from page 7.

Nina was found as a chick on 4th February 2011 at 180g. Its was weighed eleven times and the maximum weight recorded was 495g on the 4th April. It only had a trace of down and weighed 480g on 18th April when it was banded and last seen. It was the only monitored chick that survived that season so its pleasing to see it return and to the same general area where it was raised.

We are ever hopeful of finding some interesting recoveries and this season most recoveries have been of recent birds banded in the last 5 or 6 seasons. Our visit on the 21st September 2014 appeared to be nothing special we handled 50 birds of which 40 were banded. Not till band numbers were checked did Pigface and Nina show up as the only birds banded as chicks, both had slimmed down to 360g. It seems my wish to see Pigface survive and return to Muttonbird Island and has been granted.



Below: 7th April , wet tail.



Above: 15th April, ready to fly.

Beach-washed Hoary-headed Grebe By Lindsay Smith

Betty Spilsted from Australian Seabird Rescue South Coast informed me that a little Grebe had been found washed up on a local beach at Windang, she also had an immature Australasian Gannet to be released. I was interested in having a look at both, particularly in the ocean going Grebe.

Over the years I have collected many unusual birds from our beaches including Egrets, Herons, Pigeons and Parrots. I had not collected, or heard of anyone reporting a Grebe of any kind being beach washed. I was very surprised to discover that the Grebe that Betty had rescued was a Hoary-headed Grebe. After a few days rest and recuperation in care the Grebe was successfully released back in to the wild at a local lagoon.



Hoary-headed Grebe. Photo: Betty Spilsted

The Gannet was taken to Hill 60 overlooking the Five Islands and the ocean to be released. However, the number of people with dogs on the beach off leash (illegally) made the release attempt impossible. Another attempt to release the bird at another site was made. This too failed as a result of poor fitness and lack of condition. The bird would require further rehabilitation and conditioning before another release attempt can be made.

Wayward Wedge-tailed Shearwater Fledglings Text and photos by Lindsay Smith



Above: Fledging Wedge-tailed Shearwater. Note the down on the belly.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater chicks began leaving their breeding burrows on the Five Islands Nature Reserve during the last week of April 2015. Chicks from islands up and down the Australian east coast all leave around the same time. This year their departure from these islands coincided with an intense low pressure weather system, the most intense "East Coast Low" for a decade. Gale force winds and torrential rain over a period of three days led to the South Coast Australian Seabird Rescue (ASR) recovering Wedge-tailed Shearwater fledglings from local suburban back yards, road sides and industrial sites. Some birds were recovered from the Southern Highlands from as far south and inland as Yerrinbool and Goulburn NSW. All fledglings that were rescued by ASR recovered with in a few days and were released from shore after the most serve of the weather had abated.

Many thanks to all that assisted in the rescue of these "Lost" birds.

Note. The number of lost fledglings this year was well down on numbers from previous years. This tallies well with the low numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters recorded at sea from the Sandra K this past season.



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SEABIRD STUDY
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New Members...

Betty Spilsted

NEXT SOSSA MEETING

22nd August 2015 AGM
6.30 pm Saturday
held at HQ
Plus Sausage Sizzle
10 Jenkins Street - Unanderra.
NSW.
We only supply the Coffee or
Tea!!!

PELAGIC TRIP PRICES 2015

**Members: Please
enquire**

**Visitors: Please
enquire**

Australian Dollars

**Note: Some trips are
strictly for research and
will have limited
numbers!**

WOLLONGONG/KIAMA PELAGIC BOAT TRIP DIARY DATES 2015

22nd August (Saturday) KIAMA

22nd August (Saturday)
SOSSA AGM – 6.30pm HQ

23rd August (Sunday) KIAMA

26th September (Saturday)
Location TBC

6th October (Tuesday) KIAMA

24th October (Saturday) Location TBC

25th October (Sunday) Location TBC

28th November (Saturday) Location TBC

19th December (Saturday) Location TBC

***Addition Dates will be added to the
Website**

(December Trip will be the 3rd Saturday not
the usual 4th due to Christmas)

Newsletter Contributions

All are invited to contribute to our newsletter 'Albatross'. We do prefer electronic copies of any material. Send it by email to

sossa@tpg.com.au

Alternatively mail it to us on a disk, which we will return.

The editor welcomes (is desperate for!) articles from members and friends on issues relating to pelagic seabirding, 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!

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 : sossa@tpg.com.au

SOSSA's newsletter—The Albatross



The M.V. Kiama. One of the boats SOSSA is now using out of Kiama. Photo: Brook Whyllie

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!!

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