

SHORT NOTE

A near albino cape pigeon (*Daption capense*) off Kaikoura

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While we were carrying out marine survey work about 5 km east from Kaikoura Peninsula (42°25'S, 173°42'E) aboard a fishing vessel on 19 October 1999, a mixed flock of predominantly procellariiform seabirds gathered around the boat. The weather was fine with a very light north-easterly breeze and the sea was practically calm. In addition to an Antarctic fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialisoides*), a wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans chionoptera*), several Westland petrels (*Procellaria westlandica*) and sooty shearwaters (*Puffinus griseus*), there were c. 40-50 Snares cape pigeons (*Daption capense australe*) at any given time.

Among the cape pigeons we noticed 1 with near complete white plumage. We did not have use of binoculars, but the white bird came within c. 10 m of the boat which afforded us good views. The plumage of the entire upper and under wings and the tail was completely white, lacking any of the dark markings of typical cape pigeons. The dorsal area, extending from the rump to the nape was also totally white, as were the flanks and belly. The crown, forehead and throat were similarly white, but dark flecking was evident in the plumage around the eye, and extending down each side of the face. These patches of flecked plumage were the only non-white areas. The bill was pale brown, distinctly paler in hue than the very dark black-brown of typical cape pigeons. The legs and feet were of a similar colour to the bill, again lighter than those of typical birds. The iris was deep red.

Casual observations of this white bird revealed that, although it attempted to associate with the other cape pigeons, particularly when scraps of food became available, it was repeatedly pecked, chased, and generally harassed whenever it came close to a typical individual.

Albinism in procellariiform seabirds is relatively unusual, although recorded previously in cape pigeons. Oliver (1955) noted an all-white cape pigeon from Tory Channel during the summer of 1949-50, and more recently, Reid (1993) reported an albino off the north-eastern coast of Tasmania, near St Helens. In New Zealand, albinism or partial albinism has also been recorded in sooty shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) from islands around Stewart Island and from the Snares, thin-billed prion (*Pachyptila belcheri*) captured in Kaipara Harbour (Oliver 1955), Pycroft's petrel (*Pterodroma pycrofti*) from Red Mercury Island (M.J. Imber pers. comm.), Kermadec petrel (*Pterodroma neglecta neglecta*) from Raoul Island, and in grey-faced petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera gouldi*) from Whangamata (Oliver 1955) and from Whale Island (M.J. Imber pers. comm.). Procellariiform species in which albinism has been noted from other areas include shy albatross (*Diomedea cauta cauta*) (Lepschi 1990), sooty shearwater (Loomis 1918; Stallcup 1976), short-tailed shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) (Mitchell 1985; Lepschi 1990), great shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) (Lee & Grant 1986), Audubon's shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*) (Hayes & Baker 1985), white-chinned petrel (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*) (Marchant & Higgins 1990), thin-billed prion (Cooper 1971; Lepschi 1990), dark-rumped petrel

(*Pterodroma phaeopygia*) (Hayes & Baker 1985), Leach's storm petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*) (Oxley 1999) and British storm petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) (Sultana 1991).

Our observation highlights the need for caution when snow petrels (*Pagodroma nivea*) are claimed to be seen in New Zealand waters, as similarly noted by Reid (1993) for Australian sightings of snow petrels. Within the last 15 years, the Rare Birds Committee (RBC) of the OSNZ considered 2 claims of snow petrels, at sea to the east of South Island and in association with cape pigeons. Both claims were rejected by the RBC (M.J. Imber pers. comm.).

Given its striking and unusual plumage colour, it would be interesting to know whether the near-albino cape pigeon we observed could recruit to the breeding population or whether it is destined to remain a non-breeder for the rest of its life.

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