

SHORT NOTE

An update on the grey ternlet (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*) in the Bay of Plenty

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In the New Zealand region the grey ternlet (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*) is a breeding resident of the Kermadec Is. Some time in the 20th century it colonised the Three Kings Is, off the northern tip of the North Island and at least 1 group of islets, probably 2, in the Bay of Plenty. It was 1st recorded off the North Is as early as 1882, at Cape Maria van Diemen (Turbott 1990). From the late 1940s reports gradually became more frequent from Northland waters, particularly off Cape Brett, in the Bay of Islands (Cunningham 1950; Johnson 1955; Hogg 1962; Waller 1970). It was not until 1970, however, that it was found in the Bay of Plenty.

About 1000 grey ternlets were seen and filmed on and about the Volkner Rocks on 25 Jan 1970 by D. Pomeroy. The Volkner Rocks are a group of 3 stacks 5 km northwest of White Is (Fig. 1) and 50 km north of Whakatane. On 29 Jan 1970 a "lesser number" of grey ternlets was discovered at the Sugarloaf Rock, an outlier of the Alderman group, 20 km east of Tairua and 120 km northwest of White Is, also by D. Pomeroy. On 4 Mar 1970 R.A. Falla accompanied D. Pomeroy on a further visit to the Sugarloaf and found *c.* 200 grey ternlets to be present, some of which appeared to be immature (Falla 1970).

It is not known whether a few grey ternlets arrived 1st and built up gradually to the 100s that were found, or whether they all arrived at once, just before they were discovered. Their place of origin was probably the Kermadecs — Norfolk Is is another possible source — and a severe northerly gale could have been the "vehicle" that brought them. Perhaps it is significant that there was such a

gale just before their discovery, the "Wahine Storm" of Apr 1968. A grey ternlet was found as far south as Banks Peninsula, South Is, shortly after this storm (Heather & Robertson 1996). Following a Jan 1997 cyclone grey ternlets were seen regularly off Tolaga Bay between then and Apr 1997 and again on 14 Feb 1998 (G.A. Foreman in Tennyson & Lock 1998, 2000). I fished in the vicinity of the Alderman Islands, including the Sugarloaf, several times between 1955 and 1964 without seeing any grey ternlets. Similarly, M. Waller (1970), who was well acquainted with this species in the Bay of Islands, saw none while fishing in this area in Feb 1967.

Between 1970 and the early 1990s, the only sightings of grey ternlets in the Bay of Plenty that I know of, were of 3 birds feeding at the Astrolabe Reef, 7 km north of Motiti Is, on 27 Feb 1974 (pers. obs.), and 2 unconfirmed reports in 1976 from Matata (Jan) and the Whakatane River (Oct) (Edgar 1978) (Table 1). Initially I thought that these 2 unconfirmed sightings were probably mis-identified immature black-fronted terns (*Sterna albostrigata*) as they were seen on the piece of coastline most frequented by this species when present in the Bay of Plenty. However, both birds were seen outside the time of year when black-fronted terns are normally present (mid-Mar to mid-Aug), so possibly they were grey ternlets. I know of no other species with which they are likely to be confused in Bay of Plenty waters.

Until recently the Volkner Rocks were used as a bomb and rocket range by the Royal New Zealand Air Force. As a result they were not often visited by people. In the early 1990s they ceased being a target and visits became more frequent. Before my 1997 visit, and unbeknownst to me at the time, a Department of Conservation (DoC) team led by K.L. Owen visited the Volkners on 10 Mar 1993.

Table 1 Summary of sightings of grey ternlets (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*) in the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand, 1970-2002.

Date	Site	No. of birds	Ref.
1970			
25 Jan	Volkner Rocks	c. 1000	Falla (1970)
29 Jan	Sugarloaf Rock	<1000	Falla (1970)
4 Mar	Sugarloaf Rock	c. 200	Falla (1970)
1974			
27 Feb	Astrolabe Reef	3	pers. obs.
1976			
Jan	Matata	1 (unconfirmed)	Edgar (1978)
Oct	Whakatane River	1 (unconfirmed)	Edgar(1978)
1993			
10 Mar	Volkner Rocks	Old nests, eggs, corpses	K.L. Owen (pers. comm.)
1997			
25 Jan	Volkner Rocks	At least 4	K.L. Owen (pers. comm.)
Mar-Apr	Volkner Rocks	"c. 200 strange terns"	Local fishermen (via W.M. Hutton)
13 Dec	Volkner Rocks	2-4	pers. obs.
2002			
9 Mar	Volkner Rocks	33	J.A. Brierley, W.M. Hutton, B.M. Stephenson (pers. comm.)
13 Mar	Volkner Rocks	200-300	B.M. Stephenson (pers. comm.)
5 Oct	Volkner Rocks	1 probable	T. Barnard (pers. comm.)

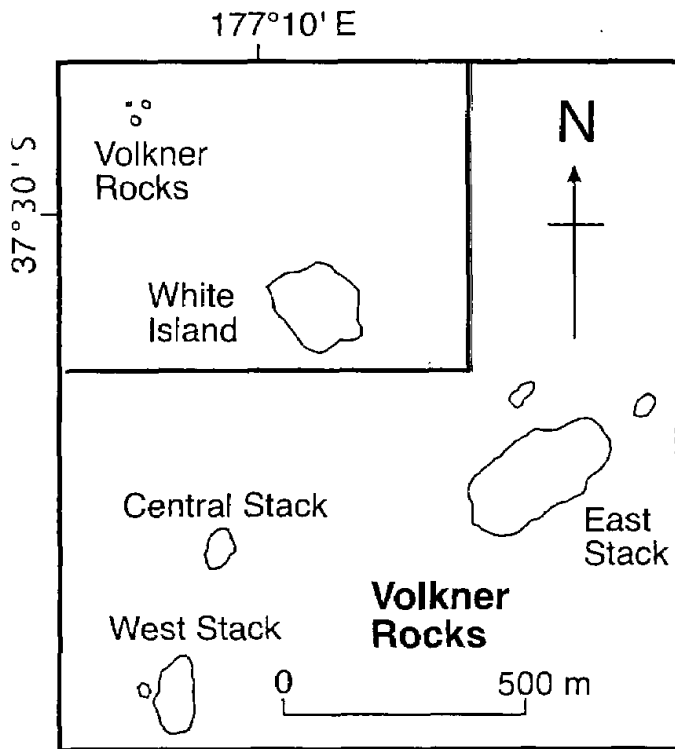


Fig. 1 Map of the Volkner Rocks in relation to White Island, Bay of Plenty.

They were able to land on the West Stack, the other 2, Central and East Stacks, being considered too difficult for a landing attempt (Fig. 2). Although they did not see any live grey ternlets they did find c. 50 old nests, 10 dead ternlets among the nests, and some abandoned eggs. One of the eggs was

taken and later confirmed as being that of a grey ternlet. On a subsequent visit by DoC, on 25 Jan 1997, at least 4 live birds were seen and videoed by A. Garrick (K.L. Owen pers. comm.).

On 13 Dec 1997, acting on anecdotal reports circulating among the local fishing fraternity of c. 200 "strange" terns being seen at the Volkners earlier in the year, J.A. Brierly, W.M. Hutton, and I visited the group to investigate. Our stay was short, the sea quite rough, and the area about the Volkners was alive with birds — c. 500 white-fronted terns (*Sterna striata*); c. 30 short-tailed shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*); c. 80 Buller's shearwaters (*P. bulleri*) — all of which made it difficult to find any grey ternlets. However, we finally saw at least 2, probably 4, before having to leave. On a winter visit, on 18 Aug 2001, we could not find any. The sea was calm and we were able to examine each stack through binoculars, seeing only a few white-fronted terns, a southern black-backed gull (*Larus dominicanus*), and some starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

On 9 Mar 2002 during another visit to the Volkners-30 grey ternlets were found roosting on Central Stack. B.M. Stephenson took photographs (Fig. 3). Some of the birds had darker grey-brown plumage on the nape and mantle and were probably immature. On the return trip to Whakatane, 3 more grey ternlets were seen in flight, c. 3 km south of the stacks. I. Saville visited the Volkners on 13 Mar 2002, and estimated that he saw 200-300 grey ternlets (J.A. Brierley, W.M. Hutton, B.M. Stephenson pers. comm.). The

Fig. 2 The Volkner Rocks, looking southwest. On the left is the western wall of the East Stack. In the centre, above the outlying reef, is the dome of the West Stack on which the Department of Conservation team landed and found evidence of grey ternlet (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*) breeding. On the right is Central Stack, on the right of which can be seen the shelf on which the grey ternlets were photographed (Photo: P. Latham).

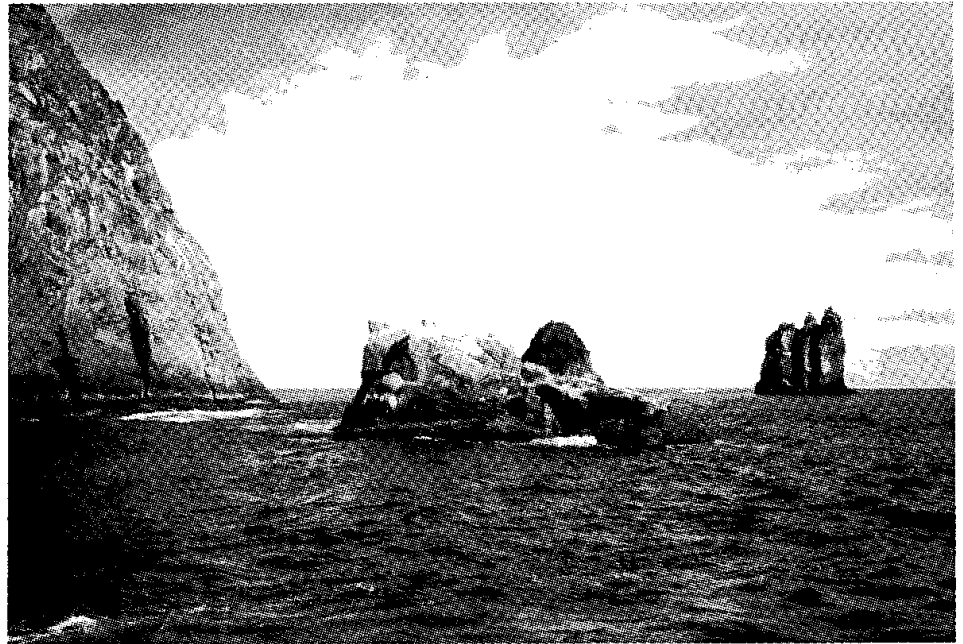


Fig. 3 Grey ternlets (*Procelsterna cerulea albivitta*) roosting on the southwestern shelf of Central Stack (Photo: B.M. Stephenson).



Volkners were visited the following spring, on 5 Oct 2002. No grey ternlets were seen on any of the stacks, but there was a probable sighting of 1 flying between the stacks and White Island (T. Barnard pers. comm.).

These observations show that the grey ternlet is still present in the Bay of Plenty some 30 years after its discovery there. Breeding, previously assumed, has been confirmed. However, despite these trips to the Volkner Rocks and the observations made, the status of the grey ternlet in the Bay of Plenty remains unknown. The size of the population is unknown, although numbers appear to have decreased since 1970. Nor do we know whether

they are present throughout the year, whether they breed there every year, nor whether they are still at the Sugarloaf.

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Keywords grey ternlet; *Procelsterna cerulea albigutta*; New Zealand; Bay of Plenty; breeding



Review

Ferguson-Lees, I. James; Christie, David A.; Franklin, Kim (Illustrator); Mead, David (Illustrator); Burton, Philip (Illustrator). 2001. *Raptors of the World*

Christopher Helm, London. ISBN 0-7136-8026-1. pp. 992, Hardcover, 112 colour plates. £49.00

The *Raptors of the World* has been 18 years in the making and was widely anticipated. I had eagerly awaited this newest addition to the Helm Identification series and was not disappointed. This book covers all 313 species in the old order Falconiformes. With the recent upheaval in avian taxonomy (Sibley & Ahlquist 1990; Sibley & Monroe 1990) that convenient group, the "diurnal raptors", has been spit into 4 orders; the Accipitriformes, Falconiformes, Sagittariiformes, and a small part of the Ciconiiformes. Whilst this is hardly a monophyletic assemblage, it is still a functional group for field ornithologists; it is this group that the book deals with.

Make no mistake this is **not** a field guide, the 992 page tome weighs in at a little over 2.5 kg! That is just a little too large for my back pocket. The 112 color plates illustrate c. 2,000 perched and flying birds and their adult, juvenile and selected immature plumages, as well as main geographical races and color morphs. The text accompanying the plates highlights the plumages shown and summarizes length, wingspan, male-to-female proportion, shape, flight, and habitat. The individual accounts detail distribution and movements, habitat, characters (perched and in flight, and including confusion species), voice, food, behaviour, breeding, population, geographical variation, and measurements.

The plates are excellent. The styles of the 3 artists do not clash. They are all very much in the British school of modern field-guide painting. It is rare today that a book is published without thousands of hours of research into both the text and paintings and this is no exception. The quality of the research is so good they have even gone to the effort of painting a saddleback in the talons of the New Zealand falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) in Plate 104. Mind you, it would be an unlucky saddleback that was eaten by a falcon in New Zealand today!

The New Zealand falcon text is short but thoroughly researched. The authors have taken the opportunity to reassess its conservation status and compare the population density of falcon using Nick Fox's data with those for the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) in Britain. They conclude that the "grassland" falcon maybe as common as it ever was in New Zealand and is not greatly reduced in numbers as some authors have previously stated.

The harrier (*Circus approximans*) text is also good, so far as it goes. The authors choose to use the name Australasian marsh harrier. It is another example of northern hemisphere authors trying to dictate common names for our birds. The current New Zealand checklist (Turbott 1990) uses the name Australasian harrier but Holdaway *et al.* (2001) could find no evi-