

SHORT NOTE

An unprecedented influx of grey-backed storm petrels (*Garrodia nereis*) in the Hauraki Gulf, northern New Zealand

COLIN M. MISKELLY

Wellington Conservancy, Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 5086, Wellington, New Zealand
cmiskelly@doc.govt.nz

The recent multiple sightings of anomalous black-and-white storm petrels (species yet to be determined) in the outer Hauraki Gulf, near Auckland, has focused interest on previous records of unusual storm petrels in the area (Flood 2003; Saville *et al.* 2003; Gaskin & Baird 2005). Until recently, the white-faced storm petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*) was the only storm petrel known to occur regularly in the Gulf, where it is a migratory summer breeder (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Other storm petrel species reported from the Hauraki Gulf include Wilson's storm petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*), grey-backed storm petrel (*Garrodia nereis*), black-bellied storm petrel (*Fregatta tropica*), and white-bellied storm petrel (*F. grallaria*) (Jenkins & Croxall 1970; Sibson 1979; Taylor & Parrish 1990; Gaskin & Baird 2005). Among these published sightings are two records of grey-backed storm petrels (both single birds) – 1 west of the Poor Knights Is on 7 Dec 1969 (Jenkins & Croxall 1970), and 1 west of Little Barrier Island in Nov 1990 (Gaskin & Baird 2005). I here report an unprecedented influx of more than 100 grey-backed storm petrels in the Hauraki Gulf in Sep 1981 that was omitted from Classified Summarised Notes (though other sightings recorded by myself on the same day were included in Booth 1983).

On 1 Sep 1981, I sailed from Auckland to Little Barrier Is as part of a New Zealand Wildlife Service-organised trip to assess the suitability of the island for kokako (*Callaeas cinerea*). Other ornithologists on board included Rod Hay, Ralph Powlesland, and Dick Veitch. I kept a nearly continuous count of seabirds observed during 5-min periods from our departure from downtown Auckland at 1125 h until our arrival at Little Barrier Island at 1610 h. Our route took us west of Rangitoto Is, then between Whangaparaoa Peninsula and Tiritiri

Matangi I (c.1310 h) to a rendezvous with another vessel off the north-eastern coast of Kawau Island (1415 hrs), and then on to Little Barrier Is.

The first sighting of a grey-backed storm petrel was of a single bird halfway between Rangitoto Is and Tiritiri Matangi Is at 1235 h. From then on, the species was seen during 16 of 37 5-min counts, through to the last sighting of 2 birds at 1545 h, 30 min before reaching Little Barrier Is. A total of 32 grey-backed storm petrels was sighted between Rangitoto Is and Tiritiri Matangi Is (maximum counts, 9 at 1250 h, 18+ at 1255 h), 19 birds between Tiritiri Matangi Is and Kawau Is (maximum 8 at 1355 h), and 53 birds between Kawau Is and Little Barrier Is (maximum c.30 at 1540 h). Many birds flew close to the vessel (within 20 m) but they did not follow in the wake or show any obvious attraction to the boat. My impression was that there were many thousands of grey-backed storm petrels in the Hauraki Gulf on that day, and they were the most abundant petrel of any species that I recorded (see below).

I am unaware of any unusual oceanographic event that might have been correlated with these sightings. I did not record weather and sea conditions, but my recollection is that the weather was fine and seas slight. No other unexpected seabirds were seen on 1 Sep 1981. Procellariiformes recorded, and their total numbers, were: fluttering shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*), 84; little shearwater (*P. assimilis*), 1; common diving petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*), 10; juvenile giant petrel (*Macronectes* sp.), 5; Cook's petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*), 7; grey-faced petrel (*P. macroptera*), 1; and grey-backed storm petrel, 104. Our return (to Leigh) on 5 Sep 1981 was in rough sea conditions at night, and no Procellariiformes were seen.

Seabird watching activity has increased greatly in the Hauraki Gulf in recent years (e.g., the 55 trips reported by Gaskin & Baird 2005), yet there has been only 1 further record of a single grey-backed storm petrel since 1981 (the bird seen in Nov 1990,

mentioned above). The absence of recent records highlights how unusual were the Sep 1981 sightings of over 100 grey-backed storm petrels.

LITERATURE CITED

- Booth, D.F. 1983. Classified Summarised Notes, 30 June 1981 to 30 June 1982. *Notornis* 30: 34-68.
- Flood, B. 2003. The New Zealand storm petrel is not extinct. *Birding world* 19: 479-483.
- Gaskin, C.; Baird, K. 2005. Observations of black and white storm petrels in the Hauraki Gulf, November 2003—June 2005: were they of New Zealand storm petrels? *Notornis* 52: 181-194.
- Jenkins, J.A.F.; Croxall, J.P. 1970. Sightings of white-bellied storm petrels in coastal waters. *Notornis* 17: 75-76.
- Marchant, S.; Higgins, P.J. (ed.) 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Vol. 1, Part A. Ratites to petrels*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Saville, S.; Stephenson, B.; Southey, I. 2003. A possible sighting of an 'extinct' bird — the New Zealand storm petrel. *Birding world* 16: 173-175.
- Sibson, R.B. 1979. Classified Summarised Notes, 30 June 1978 to 30 June 1979. *Notornis* 26: 396-422.
- Taylor, G.A.; Parrish, G.R. 1991. Classified Summarised Notes, North Island, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1990. *Notornis* 38: 267-314.