

SHORT NOTE

The Chatham Island Mollymawk (*Diomedea eremita*) in Australia

The Chatham Island Mollymawk (*Diomedea eremita*) is generally considered either a rare vagrant, or occasional visitor, in southeast Australian waters (Marchant & Higgins 1990). There is only one previously published record of the species for Australia (Brothers & Davis 1985), despite many thousands of hours of observations (Cox 1976; Barton 1979; Wood 1992; Reid *et al.* in press). On a world scale, Chatham Island Mollymawks are very rare, with 3-4,000 breeding pairs (Gales 1993; Tennyson *et al.* 1993), so an understanding of their distribution is important in order to study their ecological requirements, and potential threats to the populations. In this paper, two records from Australian waters are detailed, while all previous records are discussed.

On 1 February 1995 we observed a Chatham Island Mollymawk from the Australian Antarctic Division vessel the RV *Aurora Australis*. The ship was stationary conducting oceanographic experiments 23 nautical miles south of the Mewstone, off the south coast of Tasmania. The position was 44°07'S, 146°13'E, over water 1,000 m deep with a sea surface temperature of 15.1°C and salinity of 35.18 ppt. A wind of 10 to 15 knots was blowing from the northwest. Many other albatrosses were attending the ship; these included 30 Wandering Albatrosses (*D. exulans*), three Southern Royal Albatrosses (*D. epomophora epomophora*), one Northern Royal Albatross (*D. e. sanfordi*), 40 Shy Mollymawks (*D. cauta cauta* or *D. c. steadi*) and 30 New Zealand Black-browed Mollymawks (*D. melanophrys impavida*). One Southern Buller's Mollymawk (*D. bulleri bulleri*) had been observed at the station 30 minutes earlier. The Chatham Island Mollymawk was initially observed in flight approaching the ship one kilometre away. It flew past in the company of several Shy Mollymawks, allowing direct comparisons to be made. It never approached closer to the ship than 500 m, and was last seen heading southwest 1 km from the ship after 5 minutes of observation.

Overall appearance: the initial impression was of a small mollymawk with *cauta*-type underwings and with a distinctive and dark grey-brown head and neck (including the crown), in combination with a wholly bright yellow bill.

Size and jizz: compared with the Shy Mollymawks, it was noticeably smaller with shorter wings and body. The wingspan was estimated to be 0.1 to 0.2 m shorter than that of a Shy Mollymawk it was flying with. It still appeared larger than the Black-browed Mollymawks, and showed wings that were noticeably more flexible in the carpal and metacarpal joints.

Plumage: head and neck dark grey with a brownish tinge with a very slight impression of a paler forehead and forecrown at its closest approach. This formed a complete hood back to the mantle and upperwings, with which it appeared concolourous.

The upperwings were slightly darker grey than the hood and neck. They were noticeably darker than the upperwing colour of the other Shy Mollymawks present, though not as black as the upperwing colour of Black-browed Mollymawks.

Underwing was predominantly white. The leading edge had a narrow black border from the base of the wing to the tip; the leading edge appeared broader compared to that of the nearby Shy Mollymawks. At the base of the wing there was a pre-axillary notch of black feathers, typical of the *cauta*-group. Primaries looked black below at all times and did not show paler bases evident beyond the primary coverts. The wing-tip was thus darker than that of Shy Mollymawks present.

The underbody was white posterior from the sharply demarcated lower breast. The rump and upper tail coverts were white. The tail was of the same colour as the mantle.

Bill: wholly bright yellow. No black was observed on the bill.

On 18 June 1996, TR observed a Chatham Island Mollymawk taking baits from behind the MV *Taiwa Maru 8*, a tuna longline fishing boat. The observation was made over the continental slope to the south of Tasmania at 44°17'S, 147°26'E, over water of 12.5°C. The wind was 10 to 20 knots from the north. Other birds present at the time of the observation included three Wandering Albatrosses, 25 Black-browed Mollymawks (10 *D. m. melanophris* and 15 *D. m. impavida*), five Shy Mollymawks, one Southern Buller's Mollymawk, two Sooty Albatrosses (*Phoebastria fusca*), 10 Cape Pigeons (*Daption capense capense*), one Great-winged Petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera macroptera*), five Grey Petrels (*Procellaria cinerea*) and one Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*). The bird approached within 50 m of the boat, and was observed eating baits for 15 minutes.

Overall appearance: the bird was very similar to the first bird. The upper wings were noticeably darker grey than the upperwings of Shy Mollymawks or Grey Petrels, though they were paler than the Black-browed Albatrosses of either subspecies. The head and neck were grey, forming a complete hood. The hood was paler than the upperwings, but was noticeably darker than the hood of the Buller's Albatross. At the time of the bird's closest approach to the ship, the forehead appeared slightly paler than the rest of the hood. The bill was very bright and conspicuous; it was wholly gold-yellow, except for a dark spot at the tip of the lower mandible. The colour was brighter and more gold than the paler yellow bill of Southern Buller's Mollymawk.

These were distinctive and easily identified birds. The predominantly white underwing with a black axillary notch identified them as members of the *cauta* group (Harrison 1983). The complete brown grey hood with no pale on the neck separated them from a Shy Mollymawk, while the dark grey hood without a white crown, and the bright yellow bill identified them from the Grey-backed Mollymawk (*Diomedea salvini*; Marchant & Higgins 1990).

The first bird's bill appeared wholly yellow. Breeding adults have a small amount of black on the tip of the bill (Marchant & Higgins 1990). The first bird was

apparently too distant for this feature to be observed. The second bird's yellow bill with a black tip to the lower mandible showed it was also an adult, or close to it.

The Chatham Island Mollymawk is recognised in the current Australian checklist as a subspecies of the Shy Mollymawk (*Diomedea cauta*; Christides & Boles 1994). Mitochondrial DNA and ecological studies have recently suggested that it should be treated as a separate species (G.B. Nunn, unpublished; C.J.R. Robertson, unpublished). It is treated as a separate species in New Zealand (Falla *et al.* 1990)

The only previously published record of a Chatham Island Mollymawk for Australia is of a single adult bird present in a colony of Shy Mollymawks on Albatross Island in western Bass Strait from 17 January 1983 (not 1982, *contra* Brothers & Davis 1985) until 1986 (N. Brothers pers. comm.). A photograph of this bird has been published on page 126 of Lindsay (1986), where it was erroneously labelled as an immature Shy Mollymawk. A different bird was present at the Albatross Island colony from 1985 and was last seen on 29 September 1994 (N. Brothers pers. comm.). Both of these birds were banded on the island (N. Brothers pers. comm.). One further Chatham Island Mollymawk was observed approximately 500 m off Pedra Branca off southern Tasmania on 18 March 1995 (N. Brothers pers. comm.).

Published accounts of the range of Chatham Island Mollymawks have suggested they have a limited range: Harrison (1983) suggested that they remain over waters near the nesting site, while Marchant & Higgins (1990) said they are mainly found around the Chatham Islands, ranging to the south and east coasts of New Zealand and the central South Pacific. There have been few recorded over waters to the west of the Chatham Islands, despite extensive observations by experienced observers (J.A. Bartle, pers. comm.). Few have been recorded from the east coast of New Zealand (Jenkins 1981; J.A. Bartle, pers. comm.), or from the west coast of New Zealand (J.A. Bartle, pers. comm.). Observations from east of the Chatham Islands are too few to clarify the distribution of these birds in the central South Pacific (J.A. Bartle, pers. comm.). However, there is now evidence that during winter (the non-breeding season) a significant part of the population moves to the waters off Peru in South America (Haase 1994; Spear, pers. comm.). Most of the birds seen off South America have been adults (L. Spear pers. comm.).

This paper details five records of Chatham Island Mollymawks from Australian waters. All of them have been from the south and west coasts of Tasmania. It is impossible to know how many birds were involved with these sightings. Two birds have been present on Albatross Island, but whether the birds at sea were one of these birds or different ones (and the same as each other) cannot be known. Despite many thousands of hours of observations by experienced observers off southeastern Australia, these are the only records of Chatham Island Mollymawks for Australian waters. The small number of records demonstrate that they are an extremely rare visitor to Australian waters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the crews aboard the RV *Aurora Australis* and the MV *Taiwa Maru 8* for making our time a pleasant and productive one. We also wish to thank Nigel Brothers for allowing access to his records, and Sandy Bartle, Larry Spear, Paul Sagar and Chris Robertson for making useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

LITERATURE CITED

- BARTON, D. 1979. Albatrosses in the western Tasman Sea. *Emu* 79: 31-35.
- BROTHERS, N.P.; DAVIS, G. 1985. Bird observations on Albatross Island, 1981 to 1985. *Tasmanian Bird Report* 14: 3-9.
- CHRISTIDES, L.; BOLES, W.E. 1994. The taxonomy and species of birds of Australia and its territories. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne.
- COX, J.B. 1976. A review of the procellariiformes occurring in South Australian waters. *South Australian Ornithologist* 27: 26-82.
- FALLA, R.A.; SIBSON, R.B.; TURBOTT, E.G. 1990. The new guide to the birds of New Zealand and outlying islands. Collins, Auckland.
- HAASE, B. 1994. A Chatham Island Mollymawk off the Peruvian coast. *Notornis* 41: 50.
- HARRISON, P. 1983. Seabirds: an identification guide. Croom & Helm, Beckenham, Kent.
- GALES, R. 1993. Co-operative mechanisms for the conservation of albatross. Australian Nature Conservation Agency, Hobart.
- JENKINS, J. 1981. Birds seen at sea around New Zealand during the 1978 BAAS expedition. *Australasian Seabird Group Newsletter* 16: 3-16.
- LINDSAY, T.R. 1986. The seabirds of Australia. Angus and Robertson, Sydney.
- MARCHANT, S.; HIGGINS, P.J. (Eds.) 1990. Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds: ratites to ducks. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- REID, T.A.; HINDELL, M.A.; EADES, D.W.; NEWMAN, M. in press. Atlas of seabirds of southeast Australia. Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne.
- TENNYSON, A.J.D.; MAYHILL, R.C.; CLARK, G.S. 1993. A visit to the Pyramid and the Muramuras, Chatham Islands. *Tane* 34:171-179.
- WOOD, K.A. 1992. Seasonal abundance and spatial distribution of albatrosses off central New South Wales. *Australian Bird Watcher*. 14: 207-225.

KEYWORDS: Chatham Island Mollymawk, distribution, longline fishing, Australia

TIM REID and DAVID JAMES, *Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, 415 Riversdale Rd, East Hawthorn, Victoria, 3123, Australia*. Present addresses: TR - *Parks and Wildlife Service, PO Box 44a, Hobart, Tasmania, 7000, Australia*; DJ - *P.O. Box 69, Mundingburra, Queensland, 4812, Australia*

Manuscript received 1 August 1996, revised 21 March 1997, accepted 22 April 1997