

### White-Capped Albatross (*Thalassarche steadi*) breeding at Chatham Islands

The Forty-Fours (Motchuhar/Motuhara, Bertier Rocks, 43° 57'S, 175° 50'W) are small islands which lie about 20 nautical miles east of Chatham Island. They are the major breeding location for the Northern Royal Albatross (*Diomedea sanfordi*) and Pacific (Northern Buller's) Albatross (*Thalassarche platei*) (Nomenclature based on Nunn *et al.*, 1996; Robertson & Nunn, in press). The first overnight stay on the islands by a scientific party was from 30 November to 13 December 1991, when Graham Robertson and Rex Page camped on the island. They recorded a pair of 'Shy' Albatrosses incubating an egg among Pacific Albatrosses on the south side of the island. They presumed that the birds were from the Auckland Island population of *Thalassarche steadi* as they were paler in the head plumage than the Shy Albatross (*Thalassarche cauta*) of Australia.

Robertson & Sawyer (1994) noted the presence of a pair of White-capped Albatross on a collapsed and empty nest in the same location during December 1993. Both birds were measured, provisionally sexed and banded with numbered stainless steel bands on 11 December 1993. Measurements and plumages matched those for adult *Thalassarche steadi* (C.J.R. Robertson, unpub. data) at the Auckland Islands.

Two of the authors (CJRR and DB) camped on the island from 8 to 14 December 1996. There was again a pair of White-capped Albatross nesting at the same site, but including only one of the birds (probable female O-26552) banded in 1993. They were incubating an egg which measured 117.9 mm x 68.9 mm. These are similar to egg dimensions from the Auckland Islands (mean length = 107.7 mm, s.d. = 4.1 mm, range 74.1 - 118.8 mm, mean width = 68.6 mm, s.d. = 2.1 mm, range = 63.7 - 74.1 mm, n = 100). It was a longer egg than any from an Australian sample of *Thalassarche cauta* at Albatross Island (range = 94.8 - 113.3 mm, n = 74) (CJRR unpub. data). The nest site was visited daily throughout the visit, and both birds were changing over daily. This probably indicates a plentiful local food source as incubation stints in the Auckland Islands were a minimum of 3.9 days in late January 1993 (C.J.R. Robertson, unpub. data). A one day visit to the island on 30 January 1997 found the female brooding a chick which by size (Fig. 1) would have been about one week old. In 1993, hatching at the Auckland Islands commenced on 24 January.

On 13 December 1996 another unbanded White-capped Albatross was seen standing over an egg on a small rocky ledge about 30m SE of the nest described above. This bird was in adult plumage and bill colour, and making half-hearted attempts to display to an unattached Pacific Albatross. It is probable that the egg was from a deserted Pacific Albatross site, though it was not measured to avoid disturbing the non-breeding birds in the area.

These are the first records of *Thalassarche steadi* breeding on the Chatham Islands and the nearest population is at Bollon's Island in the Antipodes Islands group (Clarke & Robertson, 1996). This is also the first time that four albatross



FIGURE 1 – White-capped Albatross and chick at nest on The Forty-Fours.

species have been recorded breeding at the Chathams, though fossil records indicate the presence of at least four species, including a *Diomedea* species (probably bigger than any extant albatross) which bred at Motutapu Point on the nearby Pitt Island 600-4,500 years BP. (Robertson, 1991).

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