SHORT NOTE

Chatham albatross
(*Thalassarche eremita*) off the Chilean coast

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The Chatham albatross (*Thalassarche eremita*) was, until recently, considered a sedentary race of the *Diomedea cauta* group confined largely to waters about, and just east of, Chatham Islands (Turbott 1990). A revision of the albatrosses has proposed its specific status in the re-established genus *Thalassarche* (Robertson & Nunn 1997). There are approximately 5,300 nest sites at its only known breeding site, The Pyramid (Tarakoikoia), a small, steep island, south of Pitt Island (Robertson 1974; Robertson et al. 2000). This taxon has seldom been encountered beyond the waters about The Pyramid. Around New Zealand’s coast it is a rare visitor with 7 recorded sightings of live birds, mostly off Kaikoura and Banks Peninsula, and fewer than 10 beach wrecks (Imber 1966; Bartle 1974; Powlesland 1985; Guest 1991; Petyt 1995; Medway 2000). However, it has been regularly seen about the Snares Islands, sometimes ashore in the Salvin’s albatross (*Thalassarche salvini*) colonies (Miskelly 1984; Miskelly et al. 2001).

Prior to the 1980s, Chatham albatross seems to have escaped notice in Australian waters. There is no mention of it in Sverenty et al. (1971), Simpson & Day (1986) state “few Australian records”, and Lindsey (1986) does not mention it. In this latter work, however, there is, on page 126, a fine, but ill-captioned, photograph of an adult ashore on Albatross Island, Bass Strait, in 1983. Since then it has been infrequently reported from southeastern Australian waters, particularly off the south coast of Tasmania, and from Albatross Island again (Brothers & Davis 1985; Marchant & Higgins 1990; Reid & James 1997).

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northern Peru, on 22 July 1988 (Haase 1994), another on 5 August 1995 c.110 km north of Isla Masafuera (Alexander Selkirk Island) in the Juan Fernandez Group (Howell et al. 1996), a banded juvenile was taken on a longline south of the Juan Fernandez Group in August 1995 (C.J.R. Robertson in Croxall & Gales 1998), and in November 1997, 2 were observed off Vina del Mar, Valparaiso, Chile (Mazar Barnett et al. 1998). In 1999, a satellite tagged adult was caught on a longline off Chimbote, northern Peru (Jahncke et al. 2001).

On 17 October 2001, while out on the Humboldt current, c.30 km west of Valparaiso (32o 49'S, 71o 49'W), we observed a small group of albatrosses attracted to fishing boats working in the vicinity (Fig. 1). The group comprised 1 adult female Antipodean (wandering) albatross (Diomedea antipodensis), 3 black-browed albatrosses (Thalassarche melanophrys), 1 Buller's albatross (T. bulleri), 2 Salvins' albatrosses (T. salvini), and 2 Chatham albatrosses (T. eremita). All the Thalassarche were sub-adult, with the exception of the T. bulleri which was adult. One of the T. eremita was, however, probably nearing adulthood at between 3-4 years old (C.J.R. Robertson pers. comm.).

The largest of the group, D. antipodensis, was in dark-brown plumage but for a white face and underwings, pale belly-patch, and some scattered white feathering on neck and nape. Its cap was very dark brown, and its bill pink. The T. melanophrys were easily separable from all other members of the group, being the only ones with white heads and necks, and dark underwings. Two of them had blackish-brown bills, the other a dull orange one, while all had black on both underwings, and all had dark eyes. The T. bulleri had a pale grey head and neck but a white cap; a blackish eye-patch came forward of the eye but stopped well short of the bill base. The bill was black with a bright yellow stripe top and bottom. The T. salvini had blotchy brownish-grey heads and necks, but white caps. Their bills were greyish-horn with black ungues. The T. eremita stood out in the group because their heads and necks were an even dark, brownish-grey with only a slightly paler cap; this dark colouring of the head and neck merged evenly with that of the mantle. The bill of the older bird was yellow with a blackish nail and mandibular ungues, while that of the younger bird was olive-brown with black ungues. The underwings were white, narrowly bordered with black, and black tipped.

On 14 October 2002, offshore of Quintero (32o 51'S, 71o 41'W), M.M. saw another 2, possibly 3, Chatham albatrosses; all were subadult with yellow bills and blackish ungues. On visits to these waters by M.M. in November 2001 and 2003 no Chatham albatrosses were seen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Sincere thanks to Mike Imber, David Latham and Chris Robertson for reading and criticising an earlier draft of this note.

LITERATURE CITED

Keywords Chatham albatross; Thalassarche eremita; Chile; distribution