

LETTER

The Editor,
Sir,

The original specimens of the New Zealand storm petrel.

David Medway's comments (*Notornis* 51: 57-59) have caused us to look again at the origin of the 19th century specimens of New Zealand storm petrels (*Pealeornis maoriana* Mathews 1932 (= *Oceanites maorianus* Oliver 1955)). It is surprising that the strange and unlikely report of the collection of "two kingfishers" by the *Astrolabe* off East Cape on 8 February 1827 has not received more scrutiny. In the early 19th century French naturalists called storm-petrels "alcyons", while the English used the name "halcyon" for kingfishers (*British Birds* 83: 555-556), leading to a mistranslation, and this must refer to the collection of the two New Zealand storm petrels reported by the expedition. Bonaparte already referred them to the genus *Oceanites* when misidentifying them as *Procellaria lineata* Peale, and Oliver reported that they were taken off East Cape in the first edition of New Zealand birds in 1930 before being led astray (except where he reverted to *Oceanites*) by Mathews in his second edition in 1955.

According to the British census of 1891, George Carrick Steet of 130 King Henry's Road, NW, who donated the type, was a widowed surgeon born in Bath aged 72 with three daughters. His obituary in *The Lancet* for 26th November 1910 reports he had an orthodox medical career culminating in twenty years as Chief Medical Officer to the (London) General Post Office, retiring in 1891. At the suggestion of Ian McAllan his specimens have been examined for evidence of their origin. They are well and uniformly made, and six out of nine traced still

have original labels in the same bold handwriting (there only seems to be one for each species), cut from the tops of documents, four with London addresses, the earliest dated 1892, another 1894, and the latest an envelope addressed to Miss S.A. Steet at 130 King Henry's Road postmarked 17 January 1895, the month before deposition in the Museum. There is a smaller blue label on the New Zealand storm petrel with a London address on the back. It seems most likely Steet obtained the birds during a post-retirement world tour, possibly as a ship's doctor, and labelled them in London shortly before presenting them to the Natural History Museum. While the New Zealand storm petrel may well have been found off Banks Peninsula, other experience suggests this does not necessarily mean it came on board there, and it could have been in the area where other birds have occurred.

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