

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 Serenty *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).



Figure 1. Albatross group c. 30 km off the Chilean coast (32° 49'S, 71° 49'W) from Valparaiso on 17 October 2001, showing left to right, sub-adult *T. salvini*, adult female *D. antipodensis* partially hidden in trough, sub-adult *T. melanophrys* foreground, sub-adult *T. salvini*, 2 *T. eremita*, older one behind younger, and sub-adult *T. melanophrys*. (Photo: R. Powlesland).

The only record of Chatham albatross from either the Indian or Atlantic Oceans has been an internet report of one seen during a South African Cape pelagic birding trip on 27 May 2001 (Hardaker 2001). The same report goes on to mention an unsubstantiated claim of a sighting on the Agulhas Bank a few years earlier. Heather & Robertson (1996) state that Chatham albatross has been reported from "off eastern South America" but this should probably read western South America.

Until recently Chatham albatross had not been reported in the waters off the west coast of South America despite many pelagic bird-watching trips off the Chilean and Peruvian coasts (Jehl 1973; Duffy 1983; Clark *et al.* 1984; Mackiernan *et al.* 2001; M.M. *pers. obs.*). However, it has now been established by satellite tracking, band returns, fisheries by-catch, and sightings, that after breeding part of the population disperses to the Humboldt current waters off the coasts of Chile and Peru (Reid & James 1997; Brinkley *et al.* 2000; Robertson *et al.* 2000; Spear *et al.* 2003). For example, Spear *et al.* (2003) reported 27 Chatham albatrosses during a total of 396 hours of observation on 15 cruises off the Pacific coast of South America between 1980 and 1995. On 16 July 1987, a female was collected well off the coast of Peru (15°S 95°W); the specimen is lodged in the Los Angeles County Museum (103609), the first Chatham albatross recorded in the eastern Pacific (Spear *et al.* 2003). One was recorded 165 nautical miles off Chiclayo,

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 (32° 49'S, 71° 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 Salvin's 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 unguis, 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 unguis. 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 unguis, while that of the younger bird was olive-brown with black unguis. The underwings were white, narrowly bordered with black, and black tipped.

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

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