

LAYSAN ALBATROSS *DIOMEDEA IMMUTABILIS* : NEW TO THE
INDIAN OCEAN

P. HARRISON

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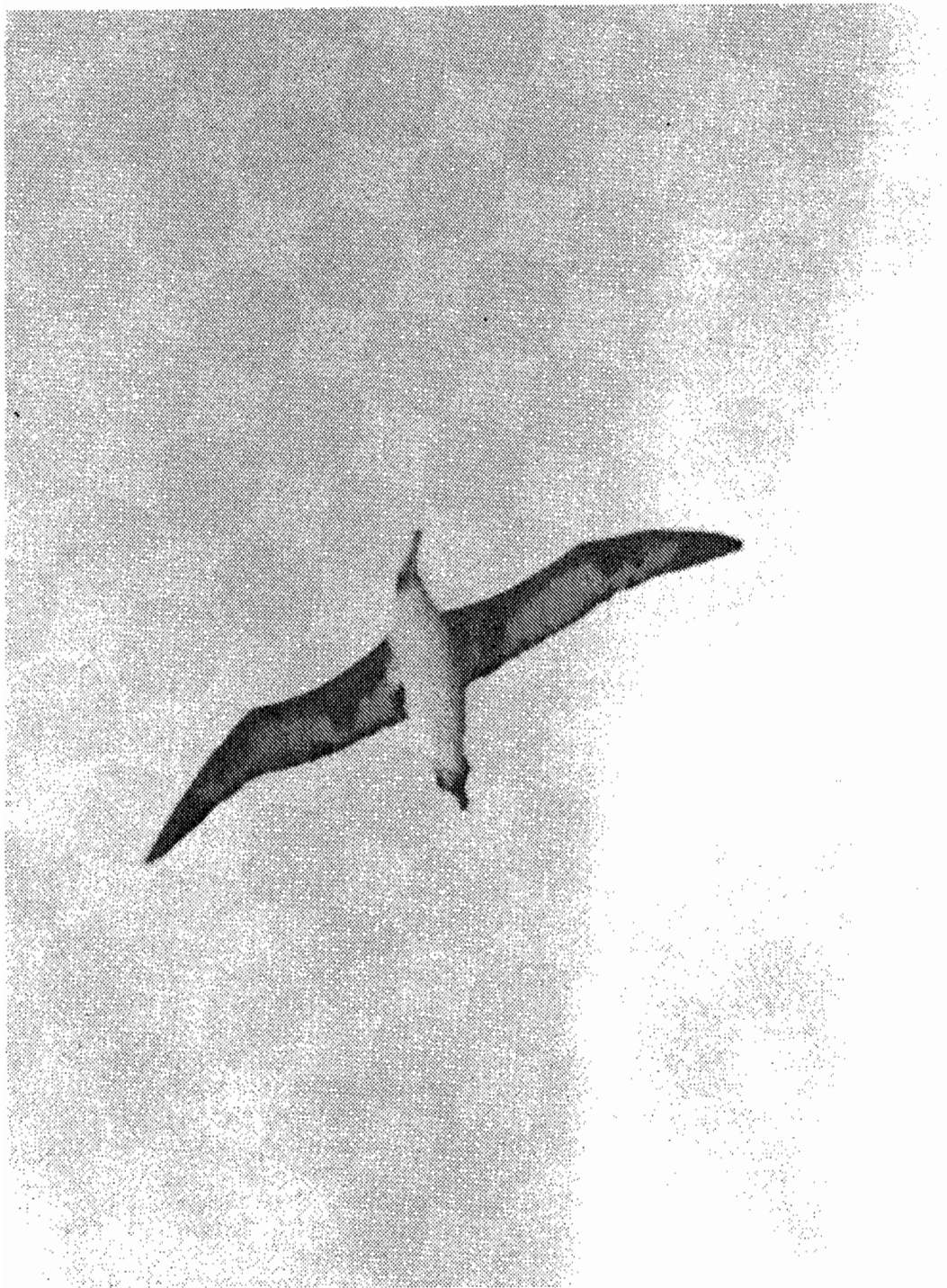
INTRODUCTION

On 29 April 1983 I and J. Cooper were carrying out systematic seabird observations from the helideck of the M.V. *S.A. Agulhas* south of Cape Agulhas, South Africa, at 37 01S, 21 42E. There was a heavy swell but visibility was otherwise good. At about 0850 GMT (1050 SAST) I observed a mollymawk soaring parallel to the ship at a range of about one kilometre. At that distance the bird looked much like a Blackbrowed Albatross *Diomedea melanophrys* and I identified as such but commented to JC that the underwing was very odd; just like the pattern of a Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis*. The bird then disappeared from view into a deep trough and neither I nor JC could relocate the bird. Because Laysan Albatrosses are a northern Pacific species the possibility that it could have been a genuine Laysan Albatross was not then seriously considered by either observer.

IDENTIFICATION

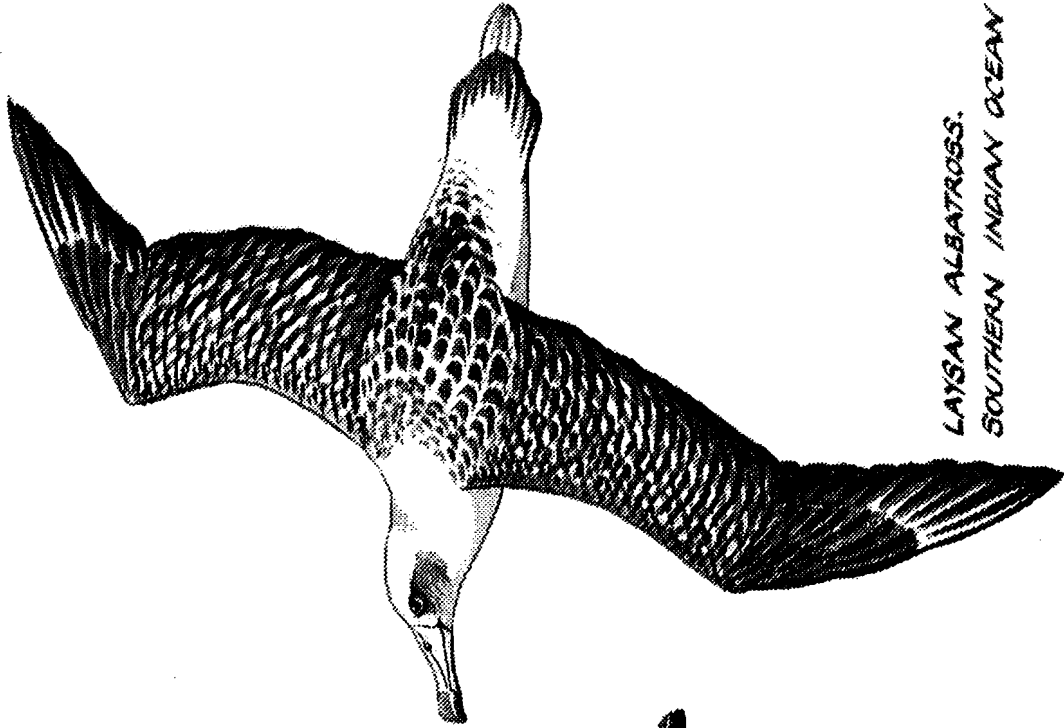
I then moved forward to the starboard side of the focsle-deck. It was from this position at 0925 GMT that I saw an albatross round the bows and fly down the length of the ship at about 50 m range. I immediately identified it as a Laysan Albatross and "chased it" along the starboard side of the ship. In that short space of time I noted the diagnostic underwing pattern, dusky tipped bill and dark eye patch characteristic of this species. I maintained visual contact with the Laysan Albatross from the poop-deck for several minutes. During that time I noted further plumage features and analyzed the identification points based on my previous experience with the species in the northern Pacific Ocean. Superficially the bird was like an immature Blackbrowed Albatross and was carefully checked to ensure that it was not an aberrant example of that species. The bill was certainly yellowish with a dusky tip but, unlike Blackbrowed Albatrosses, there was a noticeable dusky patch on the ear-coverts. This feature was visible from about 400 m and darker, for instance, than the grey collar of an immature Blackbrowed Albatross or the grey on the head of an adult Yellow-nosed Albatross *D. chlororhynchos*. Unlike any Southern Ocean mollymawk the dark saddle extended downwards towards the tail producing a dark wedge on the otherwise white rump. Moreover, the underwing of the Laysan Albatross was boldly black and white, quite unlike the transitional stages of immature Blackbrowed Albatrosses which show a darker and rather fuzzy underwing pattern.

At 0945 a "yellow-billed" mollymawk with dusky ear-coverts,



Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis* in the
southern Indian Ocean, 29 April 1983

Photographed by P. Harrison



LAYSAN ALBATROSS.
SOUTHERN INDIAN OCEAN - 29* APR

HARRISON #3.



identified as the Laysan Albatross was sighted by myself and N.J. Adams sitting on the water next to a Blackbrowed Albatross. Compared with the Blackbrowed Albatross the Laysan Albatross looked slightly smaller with a slimmer neck, proportionately smaller head and a longer bill. The Laysan eventually took flight, crossing the wake, and flew along the port side at about 65 m range. N.J. Adams was able to confirm the diagnostic plumage features (underwing, head and rump patterns). Field notes and rough sketches were made by PH during and immediately after the observation. No photographs had been taken at this stage. The bird then disappeared from view again. Despite intensive searching over several hours, the Laysan could not be relocated. Then, at 1400 GMT the Laysan Albatross was resighted in the ship's wake. Visual contact was maintained until 1600 GMT by PH, N.J. Adams and J. Cooper. During this period many photographs were taken. The Laysan Albatross was last seen by all three observers at 1605 GMT by which time it was almost dark. Even in the half light, however, the Laysan Albatross' rakish, rather loose "jizz" with feet projecting well beyond the tail, allowed easy identification from the other mollymawk silhouettes in the wake. The bird was last seen at 38 14S, 23 11E.

FIELD DESCRIPTION

The Laysan Albatross approached within 30 m of the M.V. *S.A. Agulhas*. It was seen in good light, a moderate wind and a moderate to heavy swell, using 8X and 10X binoculars when the following description was taken. The description should be read taking account of the accompanying photograph of the Laysan Albatross and the drawing made from field sketches produced while the bird was under observation.

Size and shape

Medium sized mollymawk superficially resembling a Blackbrowed Albatross but with thinner, more rakish appearance. Bill appeared proportionately longer, more slender than in Blackbrowed Albatross and the feet projected some 35-50 mm beyond the end of the tail.

Plumage

Head mostly white except for pronounced dusky eyebrow extending back through the eye to include most of the ear coverts. Body upperparts mostly brown; at close range each feather on lower back fringed paler giving a scaled effect. Unlike any southern mollymawk the brown of the lower back extended down towards the tail producing a distinct dark wedge on the otherwise white rump. Underbody white. Upperwings dark brown. Underwing white with a fairly even black margin and rather long heavy black streaks spreading diagonally across the underwing from a conspicuous black carpal patch. Tail dark grey.

Bare parts

Bill mostly dull yellowish but pinker at base with dark, dusky grey tip to both mandibles. Legs and feet pink. Iris appeared dark.

Behaviour

The Laysan Albatross behaved like a typical mollymawk, following in the wake or accompanying the ship. It maintained visual contact with the ship over a period of about seven hours. Its flight appeared more unstable than that of Blackbrowed Albatrosses seen at the same time, almost awkward at times, rarely matching the dynamic soaring ability of Blackbrowed Albatrosses. The Laysan Albatross seemed less able to cope with sudden gusts of winds and often executed strange, rather gull-like wing beats. When approaching "head-on" the wings were noticeably bowed downwards in a manner similar to a gadfly petrel *Pterodroma* sp.

DISCUSSION

The Laysan Albatross is normally confined to the northern Pacific Ocean (Palmer 1962, Harrison 1983). It nests mainly on the northwest Hawaiian chain of islands in the central Pacific but has recently been reported nesting on the Ogasawara Islands, south of Japan (Hasegawa 1978, Kurata 1978). Its pelagic range encompasses the greater part of the northern Pacific Ocean from the seas south of Japan, eastwards to the shores of California and then northwards to Washington and the Aleutian Islands. The southern and western limits of its range are not well known but it apparently has not been recorded south of the Equator (Palmer 1962, Harrison 1983).

The sighting of a Laysan Albatross in the southern Indian Ocean constitutes a remarkable range extension. There is an old published record of a Laysan Albatross from Porto Alexandre in extreme southern Angola (de Seabra 1906). Having examined de Seabra's description, I agree with Brooke *et al.* (1980) that the description actually refers to an immature Blackbrowed Albatross. Unfortunately the skin of this specimen was destroyed in a museum fire (R.K. Brooke pers. comm.). Thus the individual described in this paper represents the first record for the southern Indian Ocean and indeed, the first record of a Laysan Albatross outside the northern Pacific Ocean.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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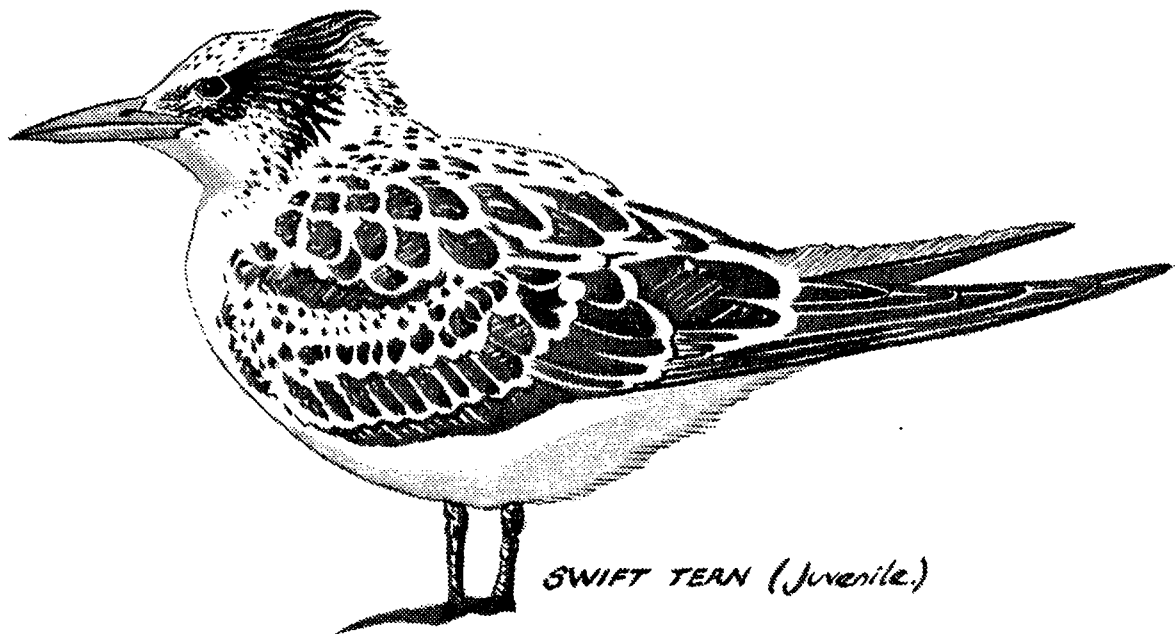
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SWIFT TERN (Juvenile.)

HARRISON 83.