

J.A. WAHLBERG'S RECORDS OF BIRDS AND OTHER ANIMALS IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN
IN 1838-1845

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Received 6 August 1992, accepted 14 December 1992

Johann August Wahlberg was a Swedish naturalist who travelled and collected specimens in South Africa from 1839 to 1845, and in Namibia and Botswana from 1854 until his death in 1856. The first English translation of his journals and letters, which include sightings at sea between Cape Town and Durban and Cape Town and Walvis Bay, has been prepared for publication (Craig & Hummel in press), but for reasons of space the entries relating to his voyages to and from the Cape have been excluded. These zoological records are summarized in this note.

Wahlberg left Göteborg, Sweden aboard the Norwegian ship *Haabet* on 19 July 1838, reaching London eight days later. He sailed from London aboard the *Eleonora* on 13 October 1838, but adverse winds kept the ship in the Channel, and they finally set sail from Torbay, England on 11 November. The ship crossed the equator on 18 December, and reached Cape Town on 1 February 1839. The return voyage aboard *The Mary Catherine* left Cape Town on 5 May 1845, called at St Helena where Wahlberg went ashore (22 May), passed Ascension Island (27 May) and the Azores (2-3 July), finally reaching London on 15 July. The Namibia/Botswana journal is incomplete, and does not include the voyage to the Cape.

On the evidence of his southern African records, Wahlberg was a careful and accurate observer, familiar with European birds, and able to identify many of the species which he saw and collected in

Africa (Gyldenstolpe 1934). However, the journal entries are generally brief, with often only the genus, in the nomenclature then current, listed; few specimens were collected at sea. The main sources for identifying the scientific names used by Wahlberg were Layard (1867), Layard & Sharpe (1884), and Sclater (1930). Names of fishes follow Smith & Heemstra (1986), and those of mammals follow Smithers (1983).

Birds recorded

Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*, a subadult bird shot from the ship's boat on 23 January 1839, off the west coast of South Africa. Wahlberg sampled the meat, but found it extremely unpleasant.

Yellownosed Albatross *D. chlororhynchos* on 8 January 1839, probably off the Angolan coast. One shot and prepared as a specimen on 17 January.

European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* sighted off the North Foreland on leaving London, 14 October 1838. Again off Madeira on 29 November; south of the Tropic of Cancer on 6, 12 and 14 December; and south of the equator from 8 January 1839. Wahlberg noted that when banking, the birds often allowed one wing to touch the water. He also referred to storm petrels as Mother Carey's chickens.

Blackbellied Storm Petrel *Fregatta tropica* or Whitebellied Storm Petrel *F. grallaria* on 9 May

1845 en route to St Helena. Wahlberg described a storm petrel with a white underside, otherwise like the European Storm Petrel; clearly one of these two species, which are difficult to distinguish at sea.

Redbilled Tropic Bird *Phaethon aetherus* seen while passing Ascension Island on 27 May 1845.

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* off Dungeness in bad weather on 19 October 1838.

Booby *Sula* sp. Passing Ascension Island on 27 May 1845, Wahlberg noted two different species of boobies. One bird was caught while sleeping on the yards of the ship; the specimen may be in the Stockholm Museum, although Wahlberg found that a rat on the ship had eaten one foot of the skin which he was preparing.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Bluefaced Booby *S. dactylatra* and Redfooted Booby *S. sula* have all nested on Ascension Island (Harrison 1983).

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* off Torbay on 11 November 1838.

Ascension Frigate Bird *Fregata aquila* seen while passing Ascension Island on 27 May 1845.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* came aboard on 15 November 1838, and a specimen was collected the following day.

Phalarope *Phalaropus* sp. seen at sea on 18 November 1838 after two stormy days.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* seen at Göteborg 28 June 1838.

Common Tern *S. hirundo* shot with a pistol at Göteborg 15 July 1838. Wahlberg noted large flocks feeding on herrings, apparently driven to the surface by predatory fish.

Blacklegged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* shot just after leaving Torbay on 11 November 1838.

African Skimmer *Rynchops flavirostris* reported without comment on 8 January 1839, well south of the equator, following a stormy day. Skimmers may frequent estuaries (Harrison 1983), and if the sighting is correct, this bird must have been blown out to sea by the storm. Albatrosses and petrels were also sighted here.

Razorbill *Alca torda* off Dungeness on 19 October 1838.

Guillemot *Uria* sp. noted at sea north of Yarmouth, England on 22 July 1838. Common Guillemot *Uria aalge* at sea after leaving Torbay on 22 November 1838.

Owl; Wahlberg used the genus *Strix* to describe a small owl which perched briefly on the ship's rail in rainy weather off West Africa on 12 December 1838.

Peaceful Dove *Geopelia striata*, which Wahlberg describes as a small pigeon, on St Helena (22 May 1845); this species had been introduced to the island from Australia (Mellis 1870, Long 1981).

Swallow ? *Hirundo* sp. Wahlberg refers to a grey-black bird with an ash-grey forehead, and another white one on St Helena, under this generic name. Swallows were not recorded from the island (Mellis 1870), and it is possible that a tern or noddy is meant.

European Blackbird *Turdus merula* perched briefly on the ship on 14 November 1838, three days out of Torbay, following two days of strong easterly winds.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* perched on ship on 14 and 15 November 1838.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* perched on ship on 15 November 1838, and one taken alive in fine weather on 2 December, three days south of Madeira.

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* perched on ship on 15 November 1838; several seen to perish in the waves.

Other observations

There are numerous references to other petrels or shearwaters, by the generic names *Puffinus* or *Procellaria*, but no descriptions adequate for identification are provided. Wahlberg also lists *Colymbus* in the North Atlantic; at that time this generic name was used both for divers and for grebes. On St Helena he saw a seed-eater listed as *Fringilla*, probably an introduced species (cf Mellis 1870).

Dolphins were often sighted, but Wahlberg refers to them by the Swedish name "tumlare", a generic term for dolphins and porpoises. One was harpooned, but not brought aboard. A Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* was seen on 3 December 1838 just north of the Tropic of Cancer, which was passed the next morning, and seven or eight others were noted on 13 December. A Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus* followed the ship on 18 May 1845, three days south of St Helena.

Flying fish, family Exocoetidae, came aboard regularly after crossing the Tropic of Cancer, and flying squid of the genus *Onychoteuthis* were also found on deck. A Great White Shark *Carcharodon carcharias* was caught off the west coast of South Africa on 23 January 1839, accompanied by a remora, family Echeneidae, and with parasitic copepods attached. Just before entering Table Bay, on a calm day, Wahlberg noted the surface of the sea covered by salps (urochordates, class Thaliacea), both as solitary animals and linked together in aggregations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Professor Michael Roberts for his painstaking translation of the Wahlberg manuscripts, and to the Van Riebeeck Society for the opportunity to work with this material.

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