

BREEDING DISTRIBUTION AND POPULATION STATUS OF THE NORTHERN GIANT PETREL *MACRONECTES HALLI* AND THE SOUTHERN GIANT PETREL *M. GIGANTEUS*

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SUMMARY

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Compilation of existing population data through the 1999/2000 season for Northern Giant Petrels *Macronektes halli* and Southern Giant Petrels *M. giganteus* indicates that the total breeding population of Northern Giant Petrels is approximately 11 210 pairs, an increase of 30% since an earlier estimate. The total breeding population for Southern Giant Petrels is currently estimated at 30 575 breeding pairs, with strong local-scale variability in population trends. Limitations to the data used in the current synthesis would indicate that current population estimates should be regarded as conservative.

INTRODUCTION

Until 1966, giant petrels were regarded as a single species. Early research by Bourne & Warham (1966), however, identified northern and southern forms, which are today recognized as sibling species with a circumpolar distribution in the Southern Ocean (Hunter 1984a). Southern Giant Petrels *Macronektes giganteus* are more abundant at the higher latitudes, although colonies occur as far north as the Falkland Islands, Isla Noir, Chile and Chubut Province, Argentina. Northern Giant Petrels *M. halli* are found primarily on the sub-Antarctic islands located north of the Antarctic Polar Front. Both species are considered among the principal scavengers of the Southern Ocean, although some studies indicate that both species are also significant terrestrial predators at some localities (Hunter 1985, 1987, 1991a; Hunter & Brooke 1992; Emslie *et al.* 1995; Briggs & Humpidge unpub. data). Although limited interbreeding between the two species has been reported (Hunter 1987), with some studies even suggesting that a third species may exist (Voisin & Bester 1981), the two species are reproductively isolated at sympatric breeding localities (Warham 1962, Hunter 1984a). The two primary mechanisms maintaining reproductive isolation are breeding behaviour and chronology, with Northern Giant Petrels breeding up to six weeks earlier than the southern species does (Hunter 1984a). Both species lay a single egg per year, and evidence suggests that, on average, 30% of their respective potential breeding populations do not breed each season (Voisin 1988).

Recent analyses of long-term population data suggest that breeding populations of Northern and Southern Giant petrels are changing,

increasing at some localities, while decreasing at others (Woehler *et al.* 2001). In most areas, however, causal factors have not been specifically identified, in part because of the relatively high proportion of adults that may be absent because of breeding sabbaticals from the colonies each year. As a result, and especially in the case of short-term studies, relating population changes to specific environmental or anthropogenic factors has been difficult, inviting extreme caution before any definitive conclusions are reached. However, particularly where long-term population decreases have been documented, factors such as introduced predators and fisheries activities have been implicated (Rounsevell & Brothers 1984, Jouventin & Weimerskirch 1991, Woehler 1996). These and other factors, including a paucity of new studies and a deficiency of giant petrel population monitoring, were identified in 1992 by the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research Bird Biology Subcommittee (SCAR-BBS) as compelling reasons for undertaking a comprehensive review of the available current and historical data on the distribution and abundance of breeding populations of both giant petrel species.

METHODS

Current and historical accounts of Northern and Southern Giant petrels were reviewed and compiled to obtain data on the distribution and abundance of the breeding populations. Unpublished survey data from numerous sources, localities and investigators were also obtained and incorporated. Censuses within each region were assigned accuracy codes based on the stage in the breeding cycle at which the censuses were conducted (Table 1). These

codes divide into several categories or types: “N” (nest) counts indicate that censuses recorded the total number of active nests; “C” (chick) counts indicate that censuses recorded the total number of chicks; “A” (adult) counts indicate that censuses recorded the total number of adults; and “I” (incomplete) counts denote partial censuses. The A-type censuses are potentially the least accurate, because they simply include adults that were occupying territories and not necessarily breeding. Because pre-breeders and sabbatical breeders tend to occupy nest sites irregularly and unpredictably, A-type surveys may generate an overestimate of the actual breeding population. For localities without a comprehensive breeding population census, records detailing breeding individuals without any census (“B”), former breeding (“FB”) and adults not necessarily breeding (“P”), were also included as a historical record. Census years were standardized to reflect the austral split season; thus, a census conducted during February 1990 is recorded as the year 1989 (i.e. the 1989/90 season). Latitude and longitude are expressed in decimal format with degrees south and west given as negative, and east, as positive. The coordinates for colony locations are approximate and were taken from various sources. Data presentation and results closely follow Woehler (1993c) to maintain uniformity with past syntheses.

Four problems were encountered in compiling the population data for Northern and Southern Giant petrels. First, the two species were not differentiated until 1966 (Bourne & Warham 1966) and therefore early population estimates and banding records refer to some combination of the two species. To investigate long-term trends in these populations, subsequent researchers employed survival estimates and band recoveries to determine the relative proportions of each species in the historical population data (see Hunter 1984a). The data provided by these researchers were thus incorporated into this review without further adjustment and should be treated with caution in terms of the species to which they refer.

Second, many early published and unpublished records cite the presence of giant petrels at particular localities, but fail to record abundance, breeding status and thoroughness and accuracy of the census; in many cases the localities also lack contemporary data. As a result, trends in breeding population size cannot be determined for those localities. Nonetheless, the data are valuable from a historical perspective, providing they are viewed with caution

TABLE 1
Census and accuracy codes

Census codes	Meaning
N	Census specifies total nests
C	Census specifies total chicks
A	Census specifies total adults at occupied territories
B	Birds present and breeding, no census performed or reported in literature
P	Birds observed in the area, no breeding individuals found
FB	Former resident breeder
I	Incomplete census

Accuracy codes	Meaning
1	Accurate to $\pm 5\%$
2	Census based on overall colony area
3	Accurate to $\pm 10\%$ – 15%
4	Accurate to $\pm 25\%$ – 50%
5	Accurate to one order of magnitude

when used to evaluate long-term population trends in light of contemporary censuses.

Third, although some giant petrel populations occur in areas where considerable research has been undertaken, the vast majority of breeding localities are infrequently surveyed, and hence population trends are difficult to assess. This problem is compounded by discrepancies inherent in the different census types, the occasional use of different names for the same locality and census dates relative to the nesting chronology of giant petrels. Because these data offer historical value, they were not removed from this compilation. Again, however, breeding population trends for these localities should be regarded with caution until contemporary censuses are available and agreement is reached on locality nomenclature.

Finally, many censuses exhibit overlap in coverage so that the boundaries of specific localities could not always be determined. For example, in the vicinity of Point Thomas, Admiralty Bay, King George Island, Lesinski (1993) combined all Southern Giant Petrel censuses into one figure. However, Trivelpiece *et al.* (1980), Jablonski (1986), and Myrcha (1993) provide separate locality names for each census site. Where such problems exist, all censuses are listed to maximise the available regional information, and unofficial names are noted with their geographic position.

In compiling available population data and attempting to ascertain regional population trends, we encountered a final challenge. Across a region, population censuses are typically not synoptic in nature, and thus regional trends are far more difficult to determine than are trends for individual localities. Moreover, for localities that are infrequently visited or surveyed, it is difficult to place single, brief surveys into context; environmental or anthropomorphic factors (e.g. unseasonal storm events, overflight activity) of limited duration but with lasting consequences on the breeding population may not be readily apparent (S. Hunter unpubl. data). Although more recent census data have become available during the interim

TABLE 2
Regional population estimates for
Southern Giant Petrels *Macronectes giganteus*

Region	Estimated population ^a (breeding pairs)	Trends
Antarctic Continent	290	
Prince Edward and Marion Is	1 800	
Îles Crozet	1 060	
Îles Kerguelen	4	
Heard I and MacDonald Is	4 400	
Macquarie I	2 300	
Antarctic Peninsula	1 190	
South Shetland Is	5 409	
South Orkney Is	3 400	
South Sandwich Is	1 550	
South Georgia & Bird I	4 650	
Falkland Is ^a	3 122	
South America ^a	1 350	
Tristan da Cunha and Gough I	50	
TOTAL	30 575	

^a Recent censuses have revealed further breeding population changes at some localities. Population figures presented here are based on the most recent available census at each locality up to the manuscript cutoff date of 1999/2000. Readers are encouraged to view this compilation as a historical record, and to review the additional literature cited in Appendix 4 for further and important information.

between the first and final drafts of this compilation, the most recent data presented in this manuscript are from the 1999/2000 season.

RESULTS

Population data for Northern Giant Petrels and Southern Giant Petrels are given in Table 2 and in Appendixes 1–3 (electronic only, available at www.marineornithology.org/abs/36_2/Patterson). Corresponding census localities are detailed in Figs. 1 and 2 for Northern Giant Petrels, and in Figs. 3–5 for Southern Giant Petrels. According to the most recent censuses at each locality, the estimated world population of breeding Northern Giant Petrels is approximately 11 210 pairs (Appendixes 1 and 2). This total suggests an increase of 30% since the last published estimate (8600 pairs, Hunter 1985). In contrast, the total breeding population of Southern Giant Petrels is estimated at 30 575 pairs (Table 2, Appendix 3), a decrease of 20% relative to Hunter’s (1985)

estimate of 38 000 breeding pairs. Because some localities have not been surveyed since Hunter’s (1985) report was published, these estimates and trends should be regarded as conservative.

Regional population trends vary (Table 2 and Appendix 2). Census data at many locations are comparatively dated or of low accuracy (or both), preventing detailed assessments of population trends. Accurate assessments and more robust conclusions regarding population status and trends await contemporary data for many localities.



Fig. 1. Distribution of nesting localities of Northern Giant Petrels *Macronectes halli*. Nesting sites at South Georgia and at Bird Island are shown in Fig. 2.

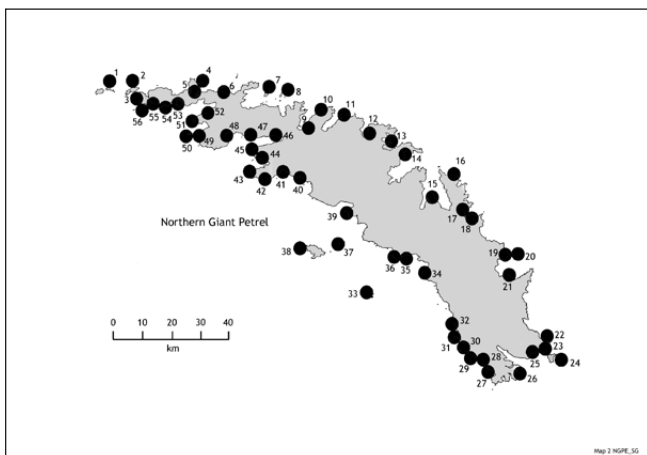


Fig. 2. Distribution of nesting localities of Northern Giant Petrels *Macronectes halli* at South Georgia and Bird Island.

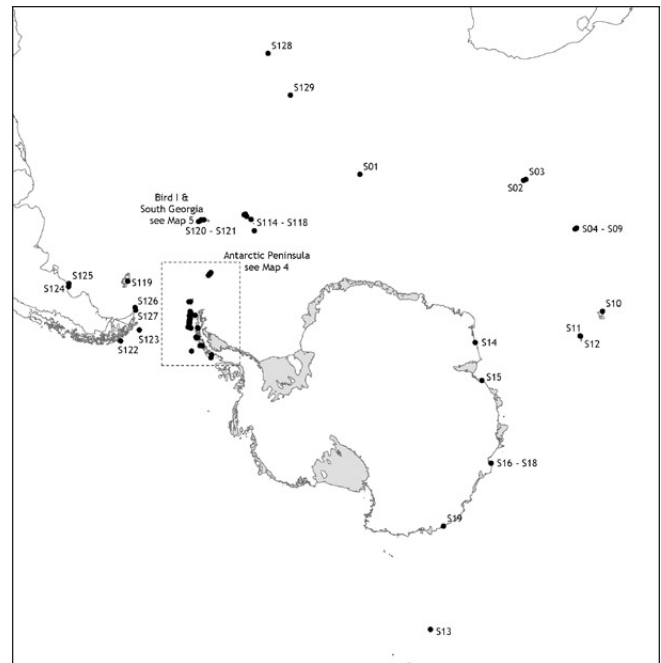


Fig. 3. Distribution of nesting localities of Southern Giant Petrels *Macronectes giganteus*. Nesting sites throughout the Antarctic Peninsula are shown in Fig. 4, and those at South Georgia and Bird Island are shown in Fig. 5.

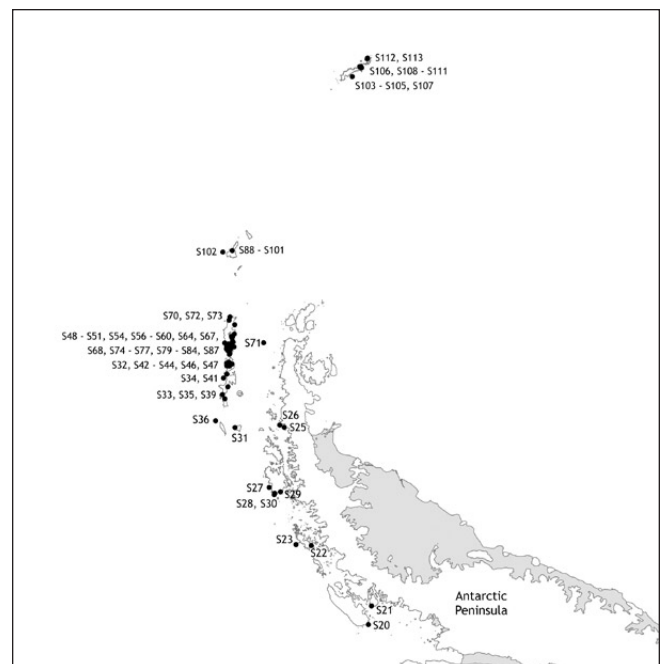


Fig. 4. Distribution of nesting localities of Southern Giant Petrels *Macronectes giganteus* in the Antarctic Peninsula.

DISCUSSION

Northern Giant Petrel populations appear to be increasing, and those of some Southern Giant Petrels appear to be decreasing. The cautionary note repeated throughout this synthesis is that the current comparison of global population trends is based partly on Hunter's (1985) totals. Hunter's (1985) global population estimate was a reasonable estimate using the best data available at the time; but the primary focus of that manuscript was not to come up with a definitive global population estimate. Thus, unless trends are reinforced by multiple censuses, it is advisable to view the population change data conservatively, especially with infrequently visited breeding sites. It is difficult to evaluate long-term population change with infrequent and questionably timed censuses for a species with highly variable breeding effort (i.e. sabbatical pairs, recruitment) and equally variable productivity within the breeding season (see Peter *et al.* 1991, Cooper *et al.* 2001, Ryan *et al.* 2003). Despite these limitations and cautions, the broad trend for Northern Giant Petrels is of a population increase, and although Southern Giant Petrel population trends vary by region and locality, the trend is mainly of stable-to-decreasing breeding populations. However, departures from these apparent trends are evident at localized scales. For example, in the case of Southern Giant Petrels, populations have been extirpated at Tristan da Cunha, and decreases have been documented at King George Island, most likely because of station activity. In contrast, populations are increasing on Anvers, Nelson and Laurie islands. The causal factors responsible for local-scale variability are poorly understood because the frequency of censuses for many breeding localities is insufficient to determine true population trends.

In the case of Southern Giant Petrels in particular, there is evidence to suggest that the extent of some existing colonies has yet to be fully documented. Reports of discoveries of new breeding colonies are still occurring, for example, in the sparsely populated areas of Tierra del Fuego, South America, where ornithological research is gaining a renewed momentum. Indeed, it seems highly probable that new colonies will be discovered in South America, given the vast areas that remain unexplored and the tendency of giant petrels to nest discretely in small colonies.

Many localities where giant petrels have been recorded breeding lack any recent population censuses. Most of what is known about the population status of these two species is thus based on data from a few sites in the Southern Ocean. Furthermore, many of

these sites have also been associated with extensive human activity, which obviously raises the issue of how such activity has influenced currently observed trends, and whether these trends are representative of broader-scale ecologic processes (Fraser & Trivelpiece 1994). Conversely, changes in giant petrel breeding populations have also been observed in relatively undisturbed areas (Woehler *et al.* 1990), thus encouraging us to consider non-anthropogenic factors within the scope of long-term population trends. Assessment of trends on the basis of current data for these two species suggest that further work, even on a limited scale, would add substantially to current knowledge. Such work should focus especially in those areas where accurate censuses from the early 1970s and 1980s are available, but have not yet been repeated.

Changes in Northern and Southern Giant petrel populations are better documented in some regions than in others. Based on the longer-term data, it is now possible to begin identifying some of the underlying factors that may be contributing to the observed trends. These, discussed below, include feeding and breeding habitat preferences, human disturbance and changes in oceanic foraging patterns.

The world population of Northern Giant Petrels appears to have increased nearly 30% since the last published account (Hunter 1985). This apparent increase has been most notable on Macquarie Island, the Prince Edward Islands and Bird Island. In contrast, breeding populations at some other areas show a decrease, as, for example, on Ile de la Possession (H. Weimerskirch, unpubl. data, Appendix 1). Northern Giant Petrels utilise carrion resources extensively during the vulnerable early chick phase (Croxall & Prince 1980; Hunter 1984a, 1985, 1987; Hunter & Brooke 1992), when most chick mortality occurs. Hunter (1984a) proposed that elevated breeding success attributable to greater carrion availability was one of the mechanisms responsible for increasing Northern Giant Petrel populations. In the presence of a relatively abundant local food source, Northern Giant Petrels may remain closer to their breeding areas and have longer brood and guard phases, and thus may be able to feed chicks at more frequent intervals than may Southern Giant Petrels (Hunter 1984a, Hunter & Brooke 1992). Briggs & Humpidge (unpubl. data) supported this hypothesis when reporting that the estimated 60% increase in the Northern Giant Petrel breeding population on Bird Island, South Georgia, between 1978 and 1996 coincided with a tripling in the Antarctic Fur Seal *Arctocephalus gazella* populations (Boyd 1993). Similarly, the Northern Giant Petrel population at Macquarie Island is believed to have increased because of its dependence on land-based seal carrion (Johnstone 1977). Thus, the recent increases observed in Northern Giant Petrel populations may reflect increased breeding success arising from these conditions.

The world population of Southern Giant Petrels is estimated at 30 575 pairs, nearly 20% fewer than Hunter's (1985) estimate of 38 000 pairs. Marked decreases in population size have occurred at Heard, Macquarie, Marion, King George, Penguin and Signy islands. Increases in population size, however, have been recorded in the Frazier Islands, at Ile de la Possession, on the southern coast of Anvers Island, at Hannah Point West (Livingston Island), Harmony Point (Nelson Island) and on Laurie Island. Although Southern Giant Petrels are more likely to rely on pelagic food resources (Johnstone 1977), Conroy (1972) and Hunter (1984a, 1985, 1991a) observed that carrion is an important food source at some localities during certain seasons. D.R. Briggs & R. Humpidge (unpubl. data) suggested that fledgling production of Southern Giant Petrels on

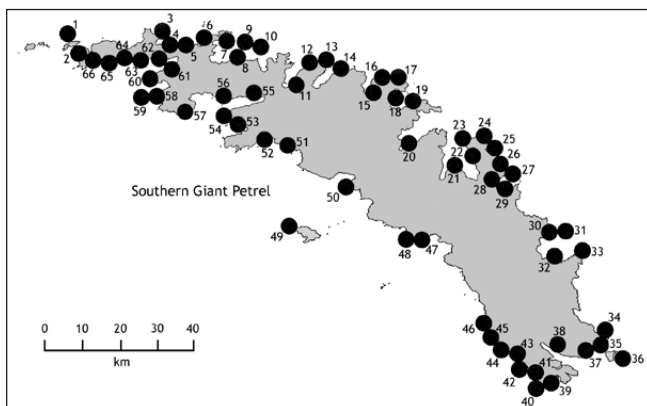


Fig. 5. Distribution of nesting localities of Southern Giant Petrels *Macronektes giganteus* at South Georgia and Bird Island.

Bird Island may be a result of enhanced carrion supplies from the increasing Antarctic Fur Seal population. On Heard Island, a 43% decrease in Southern Giant Petrel fledgling production has been attributed in part to a 60% reduction in pup production of Southern Elephant Seals *Mirounga leonina* (Woehler 1991).

Increasing human activity around the Antarctic Continent is regarded as a serious threat to wildlife populations at some localities. Continued anthropogenic pressures, including interactions with commercial fisheries, habitat destruction, overflight activity and the effects of non-native species have thus been identified as possible determinants of change in giant petrel populations (Croxall *et al.* 1984b; Jouventin *et al.* 1984; Rounsevell & Brothers 1984; Woehler 1991, 1996; Chupin 1997; Micol & Jouventin 2001; Peter & Pfeiffer 2007). Population decreases of Southern Giant Petrels in the vicinity of research stations are well documented and directly support the idea that this species is highly vulnerable to human disturbance (Croxall *et al.* 1984b; Jouventin *et al.* 1984; Chupin 1997; Rootes 1988; Peter *et al.* 1989, 1991; Marchant & Higgins 1990; Woehler *et al.* 1990; Myrcha 1993; Chupin 1997; Micol & Jouventin 2001; Woehler *et al.* 2002; Peter & Pfeiffer 2007). Population trend data for the South Shetland Islands indicate that while the breeding population size may not change appreciably over the short term, annual breeding success may be adversely affected by human activity (Peter *et al.* 2007). In some cases, a greater rate of egg loss, without a decrease in breeding effort, has been documented in proximity to research stations (Sierakowski 1991). This situation may, in turn, lead to a reduction in recruitment and subsequent decreases in local breeding populations (Woehler *et al.* 2003). Additionally, Southern Giant Petrels have been known to move breeding localities in response to anthropogenic pressure (Pfeiffer & Peter 2004, Peter *et al.* 2007). However, not all displaced pairs are documented as breeding at other localities, and newly colonised areas often retain only a fraction of the originally displaced population (Micol & Jouventin 2001). Northern Giant Petrels, in contrast, are non-colonial and prefer nesting areas with greater vegetative cover (Hunter 1984a), a factor that may limit the extent of nest failure and abandonment caused by human disturbance. At present, there is little evidence that tourism plays a significant role in negatively affecting the nesting success of giant petrels.

On some islands (e.g. Tristan da Cunha), eggs and chicks were taken for subsistence, resulting in substantial decreases and local extinctions (Elliott 1957, Williams 1984). Cawkell & Hamilton (1961) reported that giant petrel eggs were collected in high numbers on the Falkland Islands during the early 1950s because of their reputation for having the best flavour. In addition, giant petrels were killed on the Falkland Islands because they attacked cast domestic Sheep *Ovis aries* and were considered a menace to livestock (Cawkell & Hamilton 1961, Marchant & Higgins 1990). Habitat degradation caused by introduced Caribou *Rangifer tarandus*, Sheep, Mouflon *Ovis musimon* and European Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* on sub-Antarctic islands have also adversely affected the nesting success of other petrel species (Jouventin *et al.* 1984).

Perhaps a more serious threat is the increase in commercial fishing activities in the Southern Ocean. The activity of such fleets is thought to play a role in decreased survival of dispersing juvenile giant petrels (Jouventin & Weimerskirch 1991, Patterson & Hunter 2000). Both Northern and Southern Giant petrels are known to interact with fishing vessels at some point during their pre-breeding or breeding phases (González-Solís *et al.* 2000, Nel

et al. 2002, Sullivan *et al.* 2006). Southern Giant Petrels, however, are more likely to follow ships than are their congeners (Johnstone 1974), and thus they may be more susceptible to mortality from commercial fishing activities (González-Solís *et al.* 2000). In analyses of band recoveries, Hunter (1984b) and Patterson and Hunter (2000) estimated that roughly 10% of reported giant petrel fledgling mortality was directly related to fisheries interactions. However, Voisin (1988) had suggested that an abundance of garbage and offal generated from fishing activities had allowed the giant petrel population at Îles Crozet to increase.

Although many regions such as the northern Antarctic Peninsula are mainly frequented by krill harvesters, the spread of commercial longline fisheries may substantially increase hook-related mortality. Near Palmer Station (Anvers Island, Antarctic Peninsula), the instances of fish hooks found near Southern Giant Petrel nests or embedded in adult breeding birds have increased substantially over the last 10 years (W.R. Fraser & D.L. Patterson unpubl. data). Using at-sea observations, Woehler (1996) documented a 75% decrease in observed abundance of Northern Giant Petrels in Prydz Bay, Antarctica. Although interactions with commercial fisheries cannot be the exclusive cause of population decreases, it could prove to be an underestimated source of mortality in giant petrels.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this compilation suggest that Northern Giant Petrel populations are increasing, and that some Southern Giant Petrel populations are decreasing. However, analyses of population trends are somewhat limited by incomplete census data and the awareness that underlying factors influencing population change are not always apparent. Moreover, stochastic events at a breeding locality may alter within-season productivity preceding or following a survey, thus giving a false impression about the stability or trajectory of the population, especially in the case of localities with variable or low breeding success. Breeding localities throughout the two species' distributions are subject to a wide variety of influences that may alter demographic parameters. These may include factors as varied as the effects of large-scale changes in marine processes on prey availability and the potential effects of humans, including research stations and commercial fishing. The need for rigorous contemporary censuses of breeding populations of Northern and Southern Giant petrels is plainly apparent, because it is only through long-term monitoring and research that relationships between trends and causality are likely to be discerned.

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APPENDIX 4

We note the following references that have been published recently, but that have not been included in the post-1999/2000 manuscript cutoff. Readers may wish to consult these references for new population data.

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