

The species concerned are among our commonest everyday winter birds. Verification of this explanation, or the refutation of it, should be easy to secure on the part of persons who are interested in the natural history of living birds; for there are many such nowadays, in excellent position to make accurate observations, and to make from these valid inductions.

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## ON *PROCELLARIA ALBA* GMELIN.

BY LEVERETT MILLS LOOMIS.

THE technical name *Procellaria alba* has long been a stumbling-block in the way of nomenclators. It was proposed by Gmelin in 1789 in Volume I, Part II (p. 565) of his edition of Linnæus's 'Systema Naturæ.' The following is Gmelin's description:

"Pr. ex fusco nigra, gulae area, pectore, abdomine et crisso albis, reetricibus [tectricibus] caudæ inferioribus ex cinereo et albo mistis.

White-breasted Petrel. *Lath. Syn.* III. 2. p. 400. n. 6.

*Habitat in insulis Turturum et nativitatis Christi, 16, pollices longa.*

Rostrum *nigrum*; cauda *rotundata*; pedes *ex atro fusci*; digiti *anteriore dimidia sui parte cum membrana connectente nigri.*"

From the above, it is apparent that Gmelin based his *Procellaria alba* upon Latham's White-breasted Petrel, the description of which reads as follows:

"LENGTH sixteen inches. Bill an inch and a half long, hooked at the tip, and black: the head, neck, and upper parts of the body, dusky brown, nearly black: on the throat a whitish patch: breast, belly, and vent, white: under tail coverts cinereous and white mixed: tail rounded at the end: legs black brown: the fore part of the toes half way black; the outside of the exterior toe the same for the whole length: webs black: spur behind blunt.

Inhabits *Turtle and Christmas Islands*. In the collection of Sir *Joseph Banks.*"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> General Synopsis of Birds, Vol. III, Pt. 2, 1785, p. 400.

During his second voyage (1772–1775), Captain Cook discovered an island “situated in latitude  $19^{\circ} 48'$  South, longitude  $178^{\circ} 2'$  West,” which he called Turtle Island.<sup>1</sup> The position given agrees well with that of Vatoa or Turtle Island of the Fiji group, lying in latitude  $19^{\circ} 49' 11''$  S., longitude  $178^{\circ} 13' 38''$  W.<sup>2</sup> It is highly probable that this island is the Turtle Island mentioned by Latham.

Christmas Island of the Fanning group in the Central Pacific was discovered by Captain Cook during his third voyage (1776–1780). In narrating the circumstances of its discovery, Cook remarks: “As we kept our Christmas here, I called this discovery Christmas Island. I judge it to be about fifteen or twenty leagues in circumference. It seemed to be of a semicircular form; or like the moon in the last quarter, the two horns being the North and South points; which bear from each other nearly North by East, and South by West, four or five leagues distant. This West side, or the little isle at the entrance into the *lagoon*, upon which we observed the eclipse, lies in the latitude of  $1^{\circ} 59'$  North, and in the longitude of  $202^{\circ} 30'$  East, determined by a considerable number of lunar observations, which differed only  $7'$  from the time-keeper; it being so much less.”<sup>3</sup>

In acknowledging the sources of his information, Latham says in the preface of his ‘General Synopsis of Birds.’<sup>4</sup> “Among these [collections], the magnificent one at *Leicester House*, formed by Sir *Ashton Lever*, ought to be particularly mentioned; as likewise the favours received from the inspection of numerous subjects, the produce of the last and the former voyages to the *South Seas*, in the possession of *Jos. Banks*, Esq.; P. R. S. Soho Square.” This statement coupled with the statements in Latham’s description (“Inhabits *Turtle* and *Christmas Islands*. In the collection of Sir *Joseph Banks*.”) makes it clear that at least one of the original specimens of Latham’s White-breasted Petrel was obtained during Cook’s sojourn at Christmas Island.

Happily, I have before me two unworn specimens of a Gadfly Petrel (67317; 67331 U. S. Nat. Mus.) taken by Dr. Thomas Hale

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<sup>1</sup> A Voyage towards the South Pole, and Round the World, 4th ed., Vol. II, 1784, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Bowditch, American Practical Navigator, 1906, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, Vol. II, 1784, p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. I, p. iv, footnote.

Streets, U. S. N., on Christmas Island, Fanning group, in January, 1873, and identified by Dr. Coues and Mr. Ridgway as '*Æstrelata parvirostris* (Peale),<sup>1</sup> the type specimen of which was at hand for comparison.

Below is an abridged description of the two Christmas Island specimens:

Length of the skins about 14.4 inches; length of commissure fully 1.5 inches; head, neck, and upper parts of body brownish black, becoming browner on forehead and jugulum; wings and tail more decidedly black; throat with a white patch, more or less obscured by the superficial dark color prevailing elsewhere on the fore-neck; breast and abdomen white; lower tail-coverts white and cinereous mixed; tarsi yellowish brown; toes and webs chiefly yellowish brown basally, and black terminally; bill black.

From the foregoing description, it is seen that the characters of Dr. Streets's specimens agree well with those set forth in Latham's description, quoted above. The coloration of the plumage coincides, and also the length of the commissure. That Latham measured the commissure, and not the culmen, is revealed by the length of bill given by him in species now well known; for example, 'bill is two inches long' in the 'Fulmar Petrel' (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and 'three quarters of an inch in length' in the 'Fork-tail Petrel' (*Oceanodroma furcata*). The only disagreement between Dr. Streets's specimens and Latham's description occurs in the color of the tarsi, the light color in the specimens disagreeing with the 'black brown' in the description. The color of the tarsi, however, is an unreliable character unless determined in life, or soon after death; for light tarsi sometimes become dark in drying, as in certain specimens of *Pterodroma phæopygia* and *Pterodroma inexpectata*.

It seems reasonable to conclude, from the evidence presented, that the White-breasted Petrel of Latham, *Procellaria alba* Gmelin, and *Procellaria parvirostris* Peale relate to one and the same species, which according to current rules of nomenclature should bear the name of *Pterodroma alba* (Gmelin).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Streets, Bull. U. S. Nat. Mus. No. 7, 1877, pp. 8, 30; Man. N. A. Birds, 1887, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Other authors have sought a solution of *Procellaria alba* Gmelin in *Pterodroma incerta*, *P. neglecta*, and *P. arminjoniana*. Cf. Coues, Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila., 1866, pp. 143, 144, 147, 194; Salvin, Rowley's Orn. Misc., Vol. I, 1876, p. 234, Cat. Birds Brit. Mus., Vol. XXV, 1896, p. 412; Godman, Monogr. Petrels, 1908, p. 226; Mathews & Iredale, Ibis, 1913, p. 231; Brabourne and Chubb, Birds S. Amer., Vol. I, 1912, p. 31.

To the specialist in the Tubinares, changes in specific names, as above, and in generic names, as *Æstrelata* to *Pterodroma* and *Daption* to *Petrella*, are intellectual stimuli rather than handicaps. But to the general student of ornithology instability of names has become a positive hindrance, from which our present nomenclatural rules afford no immediate relief, as is evidenced by the long lists of proposed changes that appear from time to time in 'The Auk.'<sup>1</sup> The remote date of the starting-point of our present-day nomenclature is the chief obstacle to the stabilization of bird names. The combined efforts of nomenclators since the adoption of the law of priority have failed to fathom the depths of the zoological literature of the past one hundred sixty years. Obviously, if we could abandon this bottomless pit, our task would be lighter. An opportunity is offered in the projected 'Systema Avium.' After the joint committee of the ornithologists' unions has done its utmost under the existing rules, and published the results, a new starting-point could be set for ornithological names, namely, the date of publication of the 'Systema Avium.' Should other names be required thereafter, it would be the province of the joint committee to sanction the coining of new names, letting "the dead past bury its dead." When the other departments of zoölogy have been set in order, it will be time enough to consider harmonizing zoölogical nomenclature as a whole.

It should be emphasized, that the number of bird genera to be recognized is a matter of classification, and not of nomenclature. Monographers, according to temperament, will differ respecting the number to be accepted, but it is believed that in the end simplification will prevail over complication. Any classification that we may adopt must be largely arbitrary. A natural system is 'a dream of Utopia.'

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<sup>1</sup> It seems again necessary to call attention to the fact that the changes listed in the April issue of 'The Auk' are *not* nomenclatural changes, but changes due entirely to questions of *ornithology*. [Ed.]