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A SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS RECORD FOR WASHINGTON STATE

On 3 May 1970, at a point about 38 miles west of Westport, Washington, a Short-tailed Albatross *Diomedea albatrus* in sub-adult plumage was photographed at a "feed" of pelagic birds chummed in to a boat. The bird was not actually recognized as anything unusual by the birders present at the time, but was identified from a slide by Dr. George E. Watson of the Smithsonian Institution.

The circumstances of the record may be of interest, and serve to illustrate some pelagic birding problems. With nearly ideal sea and visibility we chummed in two Black-footed Albatrosses *Diomedea nigripes* which had been following a south-bound freighter. We turned north being followed by these two birds coming up astern out of the sun. The chumming apparently attracted other albatrosses which began to show up quickly. One of these passed parallel to us, stern to bow, about 200 yards to starboard. I noted it with the naked eye, photographed it through a 540 mm equivalent lens with an Exakta split-image viewfinder (very unsuitable for use in identifying a bird subject), and saw it disappear ahead of us. At about this time 12 Black-footed Albatrosses approached our boat, some circling within ten yards, and most settling on the water to feed on our suet slick.

The color slide (fig. 1) shows a bird with light under-parts, dark breast-band, light face, lightish bill and feet, a dark smudge at the end of the tail, and dark under-wings with a few irregular small whitish spots. In general proportions it appears to be somewhat broader-winged than a Black-footed Albatross. The plumage appears to be intermediate between the all dark juvenile and the clean white bodied adult illustrated in Pough (Audubon Western Bird Guide, 1957). According to Palmer (Handbook of North American Birds, 1962) plumage characters and molt sequence information for age-groups between the immature and full adult is not known; hence, field identification of sub-adult birds is hampered.

Copies of the slide were sent to birders present on the trip, and, while Short-tailed Albatross was considered as a possibility, no identification was agreed upon. Later the slide was sent to George Watson, and his reply was as follows: "I have pondered over it at length because it offers enough problems to be disturbing. It certainly is not a Black-footed Albatross. The pale bill and feet cancel out that possibility. In addition, your photograph looks less chunky than the Black-foot, especially about the head and bill. The dark underwings with light under-parts rule out Laysan. A hybrid between the two (we have several specimens) with such pale underparts would have had white feathers showing on the underwing and dark bill and feet. That leaves one possibility, an immature Short-tailed Albatross, *Diomedea albatrus*. Only one of our *D. albatrus* specimens shows similar plumage to your individual. It has dark underwings, light gray underparts, a dark neck band and pale face and light bill and feet. This is probably a three or four year old bird." The slide was also shown to Dr. Alexander Wetmore, whose experience in the Pacific was extensive, and he concurred with its identity as a Short-tailed Albatross. Copies of this slide are now deposited in the seabird file of the United States National Museum, and also in the San Diego Natural History Museum.

In the past 30 years there have been two additional records of the Short-tailed Albatross off the west coast of North America. An adult was seen about 70 miles off San Francisco, California, on 17 February 1946 (Traylor, Condor, 52:90, 1950), and an immature was seen and photographed about 32 miles west of Yachats, Ore-

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gon, on 11 December 1961 (Wyatt, Condor, 65:163, 1963). Our regular charter-boat skipper has twice reported seeing white albatrosses "big as a swan" off the Washington coast in the past five years. Though Black-footed Albatrosses came right into the chum behind the boat this Short-tailed Albatross certainly did not, which might seem to confirm statements in the literature about the species not being a "ship follower". In addition to the significance of this sighting the record also shows the value of photography in cases like this. *Terrence R. Wahl, 3041 Eldridge, Bellingham, Washington, 98225.*



FIGURE 1. Short-tailed Albatross *Diomedea albatrus* photographed 38 miles west of Westport, Washington, 3 May 1970. *Photo by Terrence R. Wahl.*

[The Short-tailed (or Steller's) Albatross *Diomedea albatrus* is a very greatly endangered species. The information available on its breeding has been reviewed in detail in several sources (Austin, Pacific Sci. 3:283-295, 1949; Austin and Kuroda, Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool. 109:298-299, 1953; Greenway, Extinct and Vanishing Birds of the World, p. 144-148, 1967; Fisher, Simon and Vincent, Wildlife in Danger, p. 171-172, 1969). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the species bred on eight or perhaps more small islands in the Japanese region (near Formosa, in the Ryukyu Islands, The Bonin Islands, perhaps the Volcano Islands, and the Seven Islands of Izu). The last known breeding in the Ryukyus was in 1930, in the Bonins in 1936, and today the species survives only on Torishima in the Seven Islands of Izu. During the first part of this century their numbers were reduced drastically by the fowlers and feather hunters on Torishima, and in 1939 and 1941 volcanic eruptions disturbed the breeding area of the few remaining birds.

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After the war, Austin (op. cit.) believed the species extinct. No birds were seen on Torishima between 1946 and 1949. In the winter of 1953-54 the species was discovered and it has bred there ever since. In 1957 Torishima was made a special reserve and regular counts were conducted there from the winter of 1961-62 to the winter of 1964-65, a period during which a total of 42 young were reared (maximum 11 in 1965). The number of adults observed increased from 16 to 20 in the 1953-54 season to 52 in the 1964-65 season. In October 1965 an eruption forced the evacuation of the weather station through which the data had been obtained, and again threatened the species. However, in a spring 1966 aerial survey of the island 23 birds were observed on breeding sites.

The breeders are at the island at least between October and June. At sea these magnificent birds formerly ranged from China and Kamchatka to Alaska and south as far as Baja California (apparently only juveniles were observed at the southeastern limit of their range – Anthony, *Condor* 26:33-34, 1924).

There are very few probable or possible observations at sea recorded in the literature since the species' near extinction. In addition to the three records mentioned by Wahl we were able to trace only the following:

– Gulf of Alaska, 140 miles from Cape Spender en route for Cape St. Elias, 25 November 1947, (Kenyon, *Condor* 52:97-103, 1950); Kenyon saw a dark bodied albatross with a pinkish-white bill and conservatively considered that it could be an abnormally pigmented juvenile Black-footed Albatross *D. nigripes*.

– off northern Japan, 40° 04'N., 147° 55'E., 17 May 1951, seen and photographed by Commander G. S. Ritchie, R.N. and other officers and men of H.M.S. *Challenger* (Macdonald, *Ibis* 94:536-537, 1952; Macdonald and Lawford, *Emu* 54:7-28, 1954); very convincing description of a subadult in a region where both Laysan *D. immutabilis* and Black-footed Albatrosses were seen. Photographs were judged diagnostic by Macdonald although Greenway (op. cit.) felt they were inconclusive.

– off Japan, 200-300 miles south of Tokyo, and within 300 miles of Torishima, 4 December 1959, 17 February 1961, 30 March 1962 and 4 February 1966; total of six individuals, including adults and immatures (Tramontano, *Condor* 72:122, 1970). Both plumages were described and Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses were at hand for comparison.

The editors are not competent to judge the validity of any records of this species. Its identification at sea is difficult since juveniles could be confused with aberrant Black-footed Albatrosses, adults with Wandering Albatrosses *D. exulans* or possibly with partial albino Laysan Albatrosses, and particularly subadults with hybrid Laysan X Black-footed Albatrosses. In the past, confusion has even arisen between adult Short-tailed and Laysan. Records such as those of Arnold (*Auk* 65:553-558, 1948, mentioned again by Macdonald and Lawford, op. cit.) or Gabrielson (*Auk* 61:110, 1944) can probably be explained in this way. – PD, GMcC and JTC]