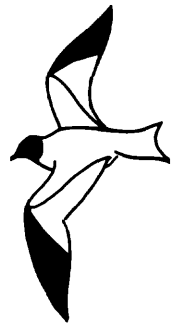


WESTERN BIRDS



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FIRST RECORD OF THE STEJNEGER'S PETREL IN CALIFORNIA

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OBSERVATION AND DESCRIPTION

On 17 November 1979 we were among 38 observers aboard a chartered fishing boat in the vicinity of the Davidson Seamount, about 55–60 nautical miles west-southwest of Pt. Sur, Monterey County, California. We had departed from Morro Bay the previous evening in hope of reaching waters where small *Pterodroma* ("Cookilaria") petrels had been seen the previous month by Robert L. Pitman and Gary Friedrichsen on a scientific survey cruise. It was raining when we departed, but by dawn the rain had stopped, and it was partly cloudy, with 3- to 4-foot swells, light winds, and virtually no whitecaps. Except for the swells, conditions were good for pelagic observations.

During the first half of the morning we saw seven *Cookilaria* petrels. Three of these were identified as Cook's Petrels (*Pterodroma cookii*), three were too distant to be identified to species (Luther et al. 1983, Binford 1983, 1985), but the seventh was somewhat darker above and had a black half-hood over the crown and nape. This bird was observed at about 08:00 for about half a minute as it passed within 50 yards of the starboard side of the boat, crossed the bow, and disappeared off the port bow. The location was close to 35°40'N, 122°30'W, a point about 48 nautical miles southwest of Pt. Sur, and over water about 1800 fathoms deep (over a deep trench southeast of the Davidson Seamount). This bird was flying with a Cook's Petrel and was similar in size and shape to that bird. McCaskie and Richard Stallcup noted the dark cap and drew this to the attention of nearby observers. Roberson watched the bird from the upper deck as it flew past the boat, unaware of the discussion about the head pattern. At this time none of the observers had any previous experience with *Cookilaria*, so the

bird was not immediately identified to species. All those aboard who saw this bird agreed it looked different from the other *Cookilaria* seen that day, but speculated that it might simply be within the plumage variation of the Cook's Petrel.

On 19 November, after McCaskie discussed the appearance of the dark-hooded *Cookilaria* with Dr. Joseph R. Jehl, Jr. of Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute in San Diego, it became clear that the dark-hooded bird was not a Cook's Petrel. Using Harper and Kinsky (1978), McCaskie narrowed the identification of the bird down to a Stejneger's Petrel (*P. longirostris*) or a Pycroft's Petrel (*P. pycrofti*). Additional research revealed that the five "Mas Afuera White-winged Petrels" collected 600 miles off San Francisco in November 1906 (Grinnell and Miller 1944) were in fact Stejneger's Petrels and not White-winged Petrels (*P. leucoptera*) as indicated by Pough (1957), and that Pycroft's Petrel was unrecorded in the North Pacific (Harper and Kinsky 1978). At this point McCaskie discussed the identification of the bird with Jon L. Dunn and others, and concluded the bird was a Stejneger's Petrel. Since that time a number of the original observers have gained field and museum experience with *Cookilaria* and agree the bird was indeed a Stejneger's Petrel.

McCaskie wrote the following account of the observation from notes taken on 17 November 1979, and after learning more about *Cookilaria* on 19 November 1979:

These two species [Cook's Petrel and Stejneger's Petrel] are remarkably similar in appearance, and it was not until literature was consulted on November 19th that I had any inclination more than one species was involved in the sightings. Both species are the same size and shape with identical flight characteristics. Both species show the same clean white underparts, and both show the same bold "W" pattern across the gray upperparts, the only difference being that the Stejneger's Petrel has a distinct black cap, whereas the Cook's Petrel has the top of the head uniform with the back.

Both species are small, being noticeably smaller than any shearwater species occurring off California but larger than a Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicaria*) [this species was present for direct comparison]. These birds appeared heavier-bodied (plumper) and larger-headed than shearwaters of proportional size, and held their wings with the bend of the wing thrust forward in the same fashion as noted on the Black-capped Petrels (*Pterodroma hasitata*) I have seen off Florida. The flight was extremely rapid with much banking from one side to the other, but the birds remained close to the water surface, with wheeling arcs lifting them a few feet above the water surface. . . .

As an individual would traverse across the water surface beside the boat, we were treated alternately to the stark white of the underparts and the blue-gray (near the color of the upperparts of a Red Phalarope) upperparts with a bold dark "W" pattern crossing the mantle. On both the Cook's Petrel and the Stejneger's Petrel the entire underparts appeared white with no evident black patterning on the underside of the wings (I specifically looked for black patterning on the undersides of the wings and felt strongly that I would have noted any had it been present). The mantle on both species appeared a uniform pale blue-gray with a bold black "W" formed by dark primaries, a black bar along the secondary coverts, and a blackish rump (This "W" was much more pronounced than the same "W" pattern on the New Zealand [Buller's] Shearwater, *Puffinus bulleri*). The bill appeared shorter and thicker than the bill of a similar-sized shearwater, and looked black. . . .

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The back of the neck and top of the head on the Stejneger's Petrel were noticeably darker than the back (mantle) and contrasted sharply with the back coloration, but the bird had the same white forehead of the Cook's Petrel, merging gradually into the dark of the crown (the head pattern reminded me of that of a winter-plumaged Franklin's Gulls, *Larus pipixcan*). The tail on the Stejneger's Petrel appeared a darker gray than the mantle. No white noted on the outer rectrices.

McCaskie's original sketch of the head pattern on the Stejneger's Petrel is Figure 1. Roberson's notes include the following information about this individual:

This was the first bird [*Cookilaria*] on which I saw the upperparts, and my attention was focused on the distinct dark "M" on the upperparts. . . . I noted only the grayish back and wing-coverts, the dark "M" (primaries, ulnar bar, and lower back), and the evenly colored gray rump and tail (the latter was slightly wedge-shaped). . . .

Jon L. Dunn, Richard A. Erickson, and Richard Stallcup, along with us, initially submitted details to the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC), and the field notes of Louis Bevier and Keith Hansen were added to the CBRC file at a later date. All were generally consistent with the description above, but with some variations. Dunn saw the white forehead and contrasting dark crown but did not note the merging of these features as suggested by McCaskie, seeing "a fairly distinct sharp contrast line segregating the cap and upper nape area from the gray upper back," and likened the head pattern to that of a Franklin's Gull or an immature Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*). Erickson did not see the head pattern, noting "by the time I heard others shouting about one bird having a black cap it was far enough out that my attempts to see it were unsuccessful." He wrote that the Stejneger's Petrel "was the only one with a conspicuous white forehead. . . . I was impressed from a distance more by the crown/forehead contrast than by the dark cap itself." Stallcup noted that the white forecrown contrasted sharply with an abruptly black cap that "continued on the nape

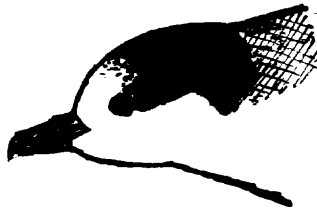


Figure 1. Head of the Stejneger's Petrel seen 17 November 1979.

Sketch by Guy McCaskie

but diffused onto a medium gray back," and that the upperwing was "patterned like a Cook's but darker on the inner wing." Bevier noted that the Stejneger's was darker above than the Cook's, and likened its head pattern to that of a Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) or an immature Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*). Hansen noted the neat black half-hood and that the white of the throat penetrated slightly into the cheek, forming a cheek pattern like that of a Myrtle Warbler (*Dendroica c. coronata*). Sketches submitted by Stallcup and Hansen illustrate white extending up into the face as a short half-collar.

The record was accepted by the CBRC after three circulations (Luther et al. 1983) and constitutes the first record for California. The record was subsequently accepted by the American Birding Association's (ABA) Checklist Committee (American Birding Association 1982) and was included in Appendix A [sight records considered correct] of the American Ornithologists' Union (1983) Check-list. In 1988, on learning that the ABA planned to reconsider the sighting, the CBRC again reviewed the record and reaffirmed acceptance. The ABA re-reviewed the sighting and removed the species from its checklist (DeBenedictis 1991), but, with additional Stejneger's Petrel reports off California, this decision is to be re-evaluated (DeBenedictis pers. comm.).

ELIMINATION OF SIMILAR SPECIES

Information gathered during research cruises by a number of observers, including Stephen F. Bailey, Kimball L. Garrett, Robert L. Pitman, Peter Pyle, and Larry Spear, has added to our knowledge of *Cookilaria* identification. This information is supported by specimens taken by Spear, Pyle, and others, by photographs obtained by Pyle, Pitman, and others, and by detailed field notes made by Bailey, Garrett, and others. McCaskie looked at all of the *Cookilaria* petrels in the National Museum of Natural History in 1980. Roberson spent four months surveying seabirds in the eastern tropical Pacific in 1989 and saw a dozen Stejneger's Petrels, along with hundreds of Cook's and White-winged Petrels. He, with Bailey, also examined most specimens of *Cookilaria* in American museums while researching a paper on the identification of this subgenus (Roberson and Bailey 1991), handling 100 *cookii*, 95 *longirostris*, 95 *leucoptera*, 37 *pycrofti*, and 34 Defilippe's Petrels (*P. defilippiana*). This added knowledge and experience have convinced us that the identification of the 1979 bird near the Davidson Seamount as a Stejneger's Petrel was correct, and that concerns raised during the CBRC review were unfounded.

During the record's four circulations through the CBRC members expressed concern about (1) the brevity of the observation, (2) discrepancies in the descriptions, (3) eliminating the possibility of a White-winged Petrel, and (4) eliminating the possibility of a worn Cook's Petrel showing a dark cap.

The sighting of the 1979 bird near the Davidson Seamount was brief (about half a minute) as is often the case with pelagic birds seen from a boat. However, the bird was rather close to the boat for a *Cookilaria* (these birds appear to avoid boats), and viewing conditions were good. It was seen by at least 30 experienced pelagic observers, seven submitting details that sup-

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port the identification of the bird as a Stejneger's Petrel. As such it must be one of the better documented sightings of a pelagic species over the open ocean.

The distribution and seasonality of the Stejneger's Petrel must be taken into account when this sighting is considered. This species was collected within 600 miles of the Davidson Seamount in November 1906, and other individuals have subsequently been reported closer to the California coast at this same time of the year. This record is of special interest only because it is the first within the limit of 200 nautical miles used to define the areas covered by the CBRC and ABA committees.

The Stejneger's Petrel nests on Isla Alejandro Selkirk (= Mas Afuera Island), the westernmost of the Juan Fernandez Islands off Chile, primarily between December and March (De L. Brooke 1987), and follows a long-distance transequatorial migration route that apparently charts a clockwise course through the North Pacific. After nesting, birds are regularly seen southeast of Hawaii (Roberson and Bailey 1991) then apparently move northwest past Hawaii toward the northwestern Pacific. Stejneger's Petrels are found off the east coast of Japan between July and September (Brazil 1991), then appear to move farther north during the late summer and fall, Terrence R. Wahl (pers. comm.) having seen individuals as far north as 45°50'N, 168°13'E at this time of year. Of the five collected off California, one was at 33°06'N, 134°00'W on 14 November 1906, the other four were between 35°40'N, 133°10'W and 35°40'N, 133°14'W on 19 November 1908 (Loomis 1918). Recent sightings in this same general area include one by Peter Pyle and David Sibley at 30°15'N, 123°52'W (about 315 nautical miles southwest of San Nicolas Island) on 9 November 1989, four more by the same two observers at 31°33'N, 123°55'W (about 225 nautical miles southwest of San Nicolas Island) on 14 November 1989 (*Am. Birds* 34:200, 1990 and Pyle pers. comm.), one by Jon L. Dunn at 32°36'N, 122°47'W (about 153 nautical miles southwest of San Miguel Island) on 14 November 1990 (*Am. Birds* 45:150, 1991), and two (one photographed) by observers on an organized pelagic boat trip at 37°19'N, 124°02'W (about 53 nautical miles southwest of Point Reyes) on 17 November 1990 (*Am. Birds* 45:146, 1991). This strongly suggests Stejneger's Petrels are regular, at least during November, over deep water off the California coast.

Discrepancies among the descriptions of the 1979 bird should have been anticipated. It would be most unusual for all observers to note the same marks and independently arrive at identical descriptions. The observers' descriptions were independent, written without consulting the literature, *contra* the suggestion by DeBenedictis (1991). Roberson, during his 1989 cruise in the Pacific, was struck by the difficulty of seeing the dark half-hood on Stejneger's Petrels once they were flying away, explaining why some observers not specifically looking for this feature failed to see it. The decisive and crisp black "W" across the pale gray upper-parts (blacker than on a Cook's Petrel) of a fresh-plumaged Stejneger's Petrel make this species look darker overall than the Cook's Petrel, and may explain why some observers were attracted to the mantle pattern and failed to note the head pattern.

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In assessing the possibility that the 1979 bird might be a White-winged Petrel or a worn Cook's Petrel one must consider the timing of molts. Both the Stejneger's and Cook's Petrels normally molt between April and August after breeding. Both species appear darker in worn than in fresh plumage because the pale tips on the mantle feathers are worn off. Wear thus darkens the head and nape on the Cook's Petrel and reduces the contrast between the dark crown and gray mantle on the Stejneger's Petrel. The white tips on the otherwise dark forecrown feathers wear off, reducing the amount of white on the forecrown of both species. Molting birds typically are missing wing and tail feathers and look "ratty." By November both Stejneger's and Cook's petrels are normally in crisp fresh plumage with new wing and tail feathers.

In contrast, White-winged Petrels, resident in the equatorial Pacific, have a different molt schedule. These birds are known to nest between December and August (Robertson 1985, Watling 1986), and, like other tropical seabirds, may breed year round (Bourne 1983). Many White-winged Petrels are in heavy molt during the northern autumn, when the temperate-zone Cook's and Stejneger's petrels are in fresh plumage.

The plumage of the bird near the Davidson Seamount in 1979 was fresh, as expected for a Stejneger's Petrel in mid-November but not conclusively eliminating the possibility of a White-winged Petrel.

The White-winged Petrel, like the Stejneger's Petrel, has a dark crown, whereas the similar Defilippe's, Cook's, and fresh-plumaged Pycroft's Petrels have pale gray crowns. The well-defined black half-hood of a Stejneger's Petrel contrasts strikingly with the white forecrown, white lower face, and post-auriculars, and with the gray mantle. The white of the face curves up sharply behind the auriculars in a pattern reminiscent of that of a first-winter Franklin's Gull. In the White-winged Petrel the dark hood extends diagonally down from below the eye to the sides of the breast. The Stejneger's Petrel looks white-faced with a neat blackish half-hood, whereas the White-winged Petrel looks black-faced with a white ring around the base of the bill.

Stejneger's and Cook's Petrels have mostly white underwings, whereas the White-winged shows a conspicuous black border, particularly so on the undersides of the primaries.

Although the vast majority of Cook's Petrels are in fresh plumage by November, a few are still molting then, one example being a bird captured alive in Santa Cruz, California, on 17 November 1983 (Tyler and Burton 1986). This bird appears to be completely out of the normal molt sequence for this species and was possibly sick. The specimen, California Academy of Sciences 71447, shows heavy tail and body molt and a suggestion of a dark hood. The pattern, however, is unlike that found on any Stejneger's Petrel. Robertson found no overlap in nape/mantle contrast between any Stejneger's Petrel and Cook's or Pycroft's Petrel examined during his study of museum specimens, even when he compared the least worn Stejneger's with the most worn Cook's and Pycroft's. He found that all Cook's Petrels showing darkness on the head also had worn or molting wings and tail.

Cook's Petrels never prominently show the white of the cheeks extending backward in a half-collar as noted and/or sketched by McCaskie, Dunn,

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Stallcup, Bevier, and Hansen for the petrel near the Davidson Seamount. Stejneger's Petrel shares this feature only with the Defilippe's and most Pycroft's Petrels; it is never present on the White-winged Petrel.

All Cook's Petrels show some white along the outer edge of the tail; some individuals, such as one photographed over the Davidson Seamount on 17 November 1979 (Roberson 1980), show a mostly white tail with a thin dark central stripe. At sea, the usually extensive white in the tail of a Cook's Petrel makes that species easy to identify, even before other features can be confirmed. Stejneger's Petrels rarely show white in the tail; if so, it is limited to a small amount on the outer rectrix. Observers who described the tail on the Davidson Seamount bird saw no white. This alone does not eliminate a Cook's Petrel but is consistent with the Stejneger's Petrel.

SUMMARY

On 17 November 1979 several experienced observers saw and described a dark-capped *Cookilaria* petrel near the Davidson Seamount off Point Sur, California. The bird was in view for about half a minute. The descriptions of it, although not identical, support its identification as a fresh-plumaged Stejneger's Petrel, and eliminate the possibility of it being a White-winged Petrel, a worn Cook's Petrel, or any other *Cookilaria*. The record was accepted by the California Bird Records Committee and represents the first Stejneger's Petrel identified within the area covered by the California Bird Records and American Birding Association Checklist committees.

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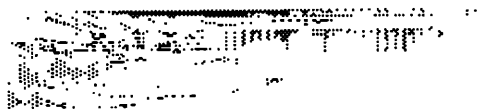
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Stejneger's Petrel

Sketch by Tim Manolts