

From the Rarities Committee's files:

Rare seabirds and a record of Herald Petrel



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ABSTRACT Rare seabirds are often extremely hard to identify, and a significant part of the problem is that, when observed from land, circumstances are typically very difficult. In many cases, one or more of the following drawbacks applies: the weather conditions are poor, views are distant and brief, and photographic evidence is impossible. For these same reasons, records of rare seabirds are also difficult to assess, particularly so if they concern what would be a 'first for Britain' for the species in question. This was the case when a probable Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana* was seen off Dungeness, Kent, in January 1998. In this paper, the circumstances and the assessment of that record are described, and, more generally, the level of supporting evidence which is necessary for acceptance of records of rare seabirds is discussed.



Rare seabirds present difficulties in many ways. They are difficult to find, and most observers will spend hundreds of hours 'sifting through' common species before encountering a rarity. They are difficult to identify, not least because the circumstances in which they are seen usually mean that, compared with most other birding situations, views are both distant and brief, and the observer is rarely given a second chance to confirm the features noted on first impressions. From a rarities committee's point of view, they are extremely difficult to assess. Rare seabirds are usually seen by a small number of observers, the weather and viewing conditions are often poor, and there are rarely any supporting photographs. In addition, the observers are frequently either unfamiliar with the species or used to seeing it in a different context (for example, at close range, from a boat in calm conditions).

These problems are amplified both for observers and for BBRC when the species concerned is new for Britain. This was the case when a probable Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana* was seen off Dungeness, Kent, in January 1998, by David Walker, Owen Leyshon and Chris Philpott. David Walker describes the circumstances of the event, and the identification process, as follows.

On Sunday, 4th January 1998, after a prolonged period of extremely stormy weather, I decided to check the sea at Dungeness for any signs of movements of displaced seabirds. I arrived at the Coastguards Tower at 09.40 hours and decided to watch from my car, since the weather was still very unpleasant. Chris Philpott was already there in his vehicle, and I was soon joined by Owen Leyshon. It was still very windy, with frequent spells of driving rain, but the light was good in the intervening periods and it was evident that good numbers of Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* and, more unusually, a few Great Skuas *Catharacta skua* were moving out of the North Sea in a westerly direction. At about 09.55, CP called out that a large shearwater was approaching. Owing to the way in which OL and I were aligned in the car, I was unable to see it and waited impatiently for it to come into view. The next call from CP then came... 'It's not a Great [*Puffinus gravis*] or a Cory's Shearwater [*Calonectris diomedea*]: I don't know what it is!' At this point, OL and I had still not seen the bird and

panic was beginning to set in. Had we missed it? A few seconds later, the mystery seabird came into our field of view, trailing behind a Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* and flying steadily west, low over the water, about 400 m offshore.

At the time of the observation the light was dull but clear, in fact excellent for observing colour tones. The presence of the nearby Northern Gannet allowed a good size comparison, while several Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* and Kittiwakes were also seen under similar light conditions and range prior to the sighting.

My initial impression was of a shearwater, about the size of a slim Cory's, but with huge white flashes on the underwing (resembling a boldly marked juvenile Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*), a broad breast band, a faint impression of an 'M' pattern on the upperwings, a few curious pale feathers in the wing-coverts, and a peculiar narrow-winged and long-tailed appearance, somewhat reminiscent of a juvenile Long-tailed Skua *S. longicaudus*. I watched it for perhaps two minutes, until it was eventually lost from view, during which time all three of us called out comments and plumage features as it passed by. After it had disappeared, we simply sat there for a while as we collected ourselves and made mental and verbal notes of what we had seen. I mentioned at the time that it might have been a Herald Petrel, since I was aware that that species had been claimed in the past, although never formally submitted. The following description was compiled from our field notes.

Size and shape

I estimated the bird to be slightly smaller than a Cory's Shearwater, perhaps nearer to an Arctic Skua *S. parasiticus* in general dimensions, but with a completely different shape. The wings were much narrower than those of a Cory's, while the tail appeared relatively long, similar in shape to that of a juvenile Long-tailed Skua. Although the wings were narrow and the tail long, it was still quite bulky.

Plumage

The upperparts were 'milk-chocolate' brown, with the wing-coverts slightly darker than the mantle, and with a faint scaly appearance. Within the wing-coverts, there were a few white feathers. The flight feathers were slightly paler brown than the coverts. This subtle difference in colour gave rise to a faint 'M' across the upperparts, although at no time was this feature striking. There was no sign of a white flash on the upperwings. The underparts were mainly pale, a

brownish white, but with a broad, ill-defined, brown band across the upper breast, of the same colour as the upperparts. The belly and throat were pale, while the rest of the head appeared to be brown. The uppertail, the vent and the undertail were also brown, like the upperparts. The underwings were the most striking part of the bird. There was a large white area at the base of the primaries, and a white band across the base of the primary coverts, divided by a dark line, as on a Pomarine Skua. The inner white band extended as a broad white line through the centre of the wing, probably along the base of the underwing-coverts. The rest of the wing was dark, with no hint of white on the leading edge of the underwing.

Flight

The petrel flew past low above the water, in a straight line, occasionally with a slight roll from side to side. The wings appeared to be slightly bowed for most of the time, since it was simply gliding into the wind, but at times it would give a short bout of rapid, fluttering wing flaps, mainly from the wrist down, i.e. just the wingtips seemed to be flapped. At no time did it rise high into the air, or soar.

We returned to the Observatory to compare our notes with the available literature while the sighting was still fresh in our minds (there seemed little point in continuing with the seawatch). The only reliable material seemed to be the two books by Harrison (1983, 1987). The drawings of Herald Petrel in the former (Harrison 1983) were quite close to what we had seen, but there were some differences. The main points about our bird which seemed not to fit were: (i) it was possibly too large; (ii) the flight action was 'wrong'; (iii) the upperparts were not dark enough; (iv) the wing lacked a pale leading edge; and (v) the dark 'M' on the upperparts was not sufficiently distinct. Nonetheless, we could not find any other species which came close. We decided that more research was needed but, just in case it was seen again, we alerted the birdlines and all seawatchers at points to the west of Dungeness.

By chance, only a few days later, an article by Dubois & Seitre (1997) was published which described a Herald Petrel seen in the Azores, and which contained photos of that and other individuals. Although the Azores petrel was a dark morph, virtually all the apparently 'problematic' features of the Dungeness petrel now seemed to fit Herald Petrel perfectly. The Azores petrel was likened to a Cory's Shearwater in size, but the 'body was much lighter and the wings narrower than in that species'. In addi-

tion, one photograph showed a long-tailed appearance; the flight action was described as gliding, not soaring and arcing; there was no sign of a white leading edge to the wing in any of the photographs; there was little indication of an 'M' on the upperparts, although the coverts appeared darker than the flight feathers; and the upperparts showed a number of isolated white feathers.

I contacted Anthony McGeehan, who kindly sent slides of a Herald Petrel which he had seen off North Carolina, USA, together with copies of some of the references mentioned in Dubois & Seitre (1997). The slides from AM clearly showed large white underwing patches, similar to those of the Dungeness petrel. The texts were, however, of limited value, since they referred mainly to dark-morph individuals and contained little field information. Gochfeld *et al.* (1988) did, however, mention the long, wedge-shaped tail, while Lee (1984) noted the flight as being more like that of a shearwater than that of a gadfly-petrel, and observed that the light patches on the underwing suggested a skua. Finally, Charles Wilkins provided me with two slides of pale/intermediate-morph Herald Petrels taken at Round Island, in the Indian Ocean. These seemed to remove any remaining doubts. The coloration of the upperparts was exactly as on the Dungeness petrel, being pale brown and not at all blackish. The wings also lacked both a white leading edge and a striking 'M' on the upper surface, and had occasional, isolated white feathers; in short, they were virtually identical to those of the seabird which we had seen.

I am now quite sure that the Dungeness petrel was a pale/intermediate-morph Herald Petrel, a species which is clearly quite variable in plumage. This individual was obviously not of the dark morph, but I am presently unsure how to differentiate between pale and intermediate morphs. The intermediate morph shown in plate 154 of Harrison (1987), with its darker ventral region, is certainly closer to the bird which we saw than is that depicted in his plate 153. Perhaps the latter is really a pale morph? One of the problems encountered during this research has been the lack of suitable reference material. Since the species has only recently been admitted to the Western Palearctic List, it is not featured in most relevant field guides or in *BWP*. The American literature adds little of relevance for field identification. As part of the



Brian Sullivan

83. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.



George Armistead

84. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.



Brian Sullivan

85. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.

identification process, there are several other species which must be eliminated. I have seen none of these, so that my comments rely completely on published information. Most of the points below are derived from the plates and text in Harrison (1983, 1987).

Kerguelen Petrel *Pterodroma brevirostris*. The white (not silvery) underwings and the pale belly of the Dungeness petrel eliminate this species.

'Soft-plumaged petrel' *P. madeira/feae/mollis*. My impression is that all these taxa would be much greyer in overall plumage tones than the petrel which we saw, and would appear much smaller, with a proportionally larger body and shorter wings. The underwing pattern is also inconsistent with that which we observed.

Atlantic Petrel *P. incerta*. The white patterning of the underwing of the Dungeness petrel, together with its white throat, eliminate Atlantic Petrel.

Kermadec Petrel *P. neglecta*. The Dungeness petrel lacked white primary shafts on the upperwings and at the base of the tail. The tail was also probably too long for Kermadec Petrel.

I believe that all other possible species would show completely dark underparts and/or an obvious 'M' on the upperwings.

In conclusion, all of the features described above appear to be consistent with a Herald Petrel, including several noted during the observation which, initially, seemed to be 'incorrect'. All the possible confusion species can be eliminated. Since the publication of Dubois & Seitre (1997), Shawneen Finnegan has claimed that there have been 40 records of Herald Petrel off eastern North America since 1991, including nine individuals of the pale/intermediate morph (*Birding World* 11: 67). Perhaps, therefore, this species is commoner, or is becoming commoner, than was previously realised.

A detailed description was also supplied by Owen Leyshon, which confirmed both the circumstances and most of the features of the Dungeness petrel described by DW. OL had seen the bird only through binoculars, and had noted the tail as 'short', and there were also some differences in the way in which the two observers had interpreted the colour and patterning of the petrel. These variations were,

however, entirely compatible with the difference in optical equipment used, and consequently in the views of the bird obtained by the observers.

Taxonomy of Herald Petrel

There are currently two accepted races of Herald Petrel. The nominate form *arminjoniana* ('Trindade Petrel', often erroneously spelt as 'Trinidad') breeds in the South Atlantic and also in the Indian Ocean, on Round Island and Mauritius, while *P. a. heraldica* breeds in the Pacific Ocean. There is, however, some evidence that the Round Island petrels are genetically more similar to those in the Pacific Ocean than to those in the South Atlantic. Although these two forms are still considered subspecies of Herald Petrel, differences between them in plumage, morphology and, perhaps, vocalisations have led some to argue that 'Trindade Petrel' should be elevated to the status of a full species. Since the type specimen was collected on Trindade, it would presumably retain the present scientific name, *P. arminjoniana*, while the Pacific form would become *P. heraldica*.

'Trindade Petrel' is named after one of its two known breeding localities, a small group of islets lying about 1,200 km off the east coast of Brazil; it also breeds close by on the islet of Pedro Segundo, part of the Martin Vaz archipelago. The breeding population of Trindade is estimated to be about 5,000 individuals. Its non-breeding range is poorly known, although it is now regularly seen off the coasts of North and South Carolina during the summer months. It has three colour morphs (pale, intermediate and dark), and, while the relative abundance of each is unknown, the majority of those seen and photographed in the Gulf Stream off North America have been classified as dark morph.

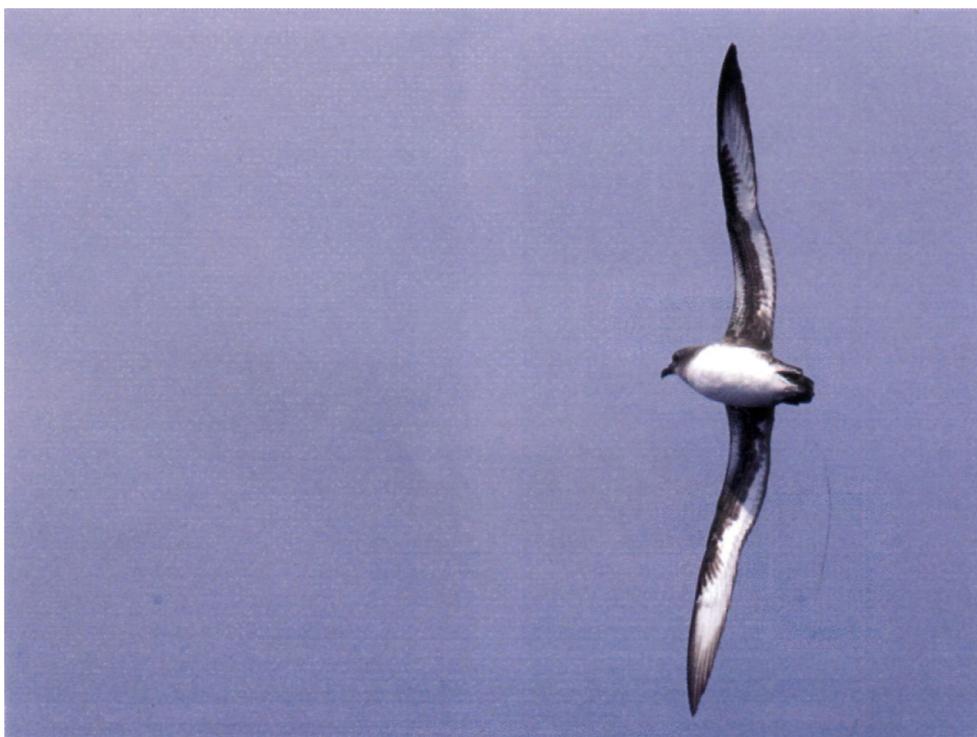
Assessment of the Dungeness petrel

During the first circulation of the record, several BBRC members commented on the paucity of information on the pale or intermediate morph of the Atlantic form of Herald Petrel. DW had seen photographs of the Round Island petrels, but we were not sure how relevant this might be, since mitochondrial-DNA analysis has suggested that these are genetically similar to the pale-morph Herald Petrels of the Pacific (Brooke & Rowe 1996). Field observations of Herald Petrel in the North Atlantic have been made primarily between May and Sep-



George Armistead

86. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.



Brian Sullivan

87. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.

tember, and we were not aware of any published descriptions of what the species might look like, or, indeed, where it might be, in January. Most members were concerned that the flight of the Dungeness petrel, as described, did not seem compatible with that of most *Pterodroma* petrels under similar conditions.

While there was no doubt that the three observers had seen an amazing seabird, the description of which seemed closest to that of a pale-morph Herald Petrel, the prevailing opinion of BBRC was that, given (i) the brevity of views and the poor weather conditions, (ii) some relatively minor discrepancies between the two submitted descriptions, (iii) the fact that the observers had little or no experience of the possible confusion species, and (iv) the enormity of the record, this submission would be unlikely to make the grade as a 'first for Britain'. Since this species was, however, also outside the experience of most members of the Committee, we decided to seek expert advice, both from Britain and from North America. The key questions to which we wished to find answers were as follows.

- Can Herald Petrel show the flight pattern described for the Dungeness petrel in wind-speeds of more than 20 knots?
- What colour would the upperparts of pale/intermediate-morph Herald Petrel be?
- Can pale/intermediate-morph Herald Petrels show only a slight impression of a dark 'M' across the upperwings?
- Do Herald Petrels ever show a scaly pattern on the upperwing-coverts?

Having studied the evidence, our experts replied that, in their opinion, the plumage of the Dungeness petrel was within the range of variation shown by Herald Petrel. The first expert felt that 'everything in the notes [above], with the exception of the description of the flight pattern, accords with my experience of pale-morph "Trindade" or Herald Petrel. I have observed about 13 pale morphs at sea in the western North Atlantic, and two further individuals from land. I have seen perhaps half a dozen "intermediate" morphs, and 40 or so dark morphs, plus Atlantic Petrel and Kerguelen Petrel in the Scotia Sea, but none of the Pacific *Pterodroma*. The description of flight style bothered me at first, but I recall seawatching in

the USA, during the spring migration, and seeing Sooty Shearwaters *Puffinus griseus* execute a quite astonishing flight style which I have never seen offshore. The birds battled an onshore wind and, to maintain their northward progress, they hugged the surface of the ocean, with belly to the water, like a cross between a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and an Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri*, never sailing up in typically dynamic sinusoidal flight (in fact, the typical crucifix shape, with the axis of wings held perpendicular to the ocean's surface, was never seen). Several years later I was able to observe a whole host of "deviations" from typical flight behaviour during several tropical cyclones. Three Herald Petrels seen in similar conditions in 1996 deviated from their typical flight pattern, but not in precisely the manner described above. I would be happy to endorse this description as referring to Herald Petrel were it not for the word "fluttering". It is difficult to visualise this gadfly-petrel "fluttering", but, of course, the use of this word may have other subjective connotations to the observer, or may just be an inappropriate choice of word. In any case, I do believe that tubenoses have a wide variety of flight styles, and that a seabird rounding a headland into a strong wind would certainly have to abandon dynamic flight. The flight described is certainly plausible for this species, but I have not observed it myself.

'The date of observation would probably raise eyebrows in North America, but I think it is not a major problem. There is a December record (a specimen) from the mid Atlantic, and I expect that if we put in more effort offshore at that time of year we would see a few here as well.'

Our second expert agreed. 'I have seen seven or eight Herald Petrels on trips out of North Carolina over the last couple of years. Some of them were very close, others a little more distant (and, therefore, possibly of more use from a seawatching point of view), but all have been from boats, in quite calm weather and in bright sunshine. I have seen only one pale and one or two intermediate morphs, [while] the rest were dark morphs. Because of this, I feel that I cannot comment on the variability of the upperwing pattern, or the mottling, although all those which I have seen, in May and June, appeared uniform, with no mottling.

'With regard to the flight described,



Brian Patteson

88. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000. This individual has a much darker underwing than is typical for a pale-morph Herald Petrel.



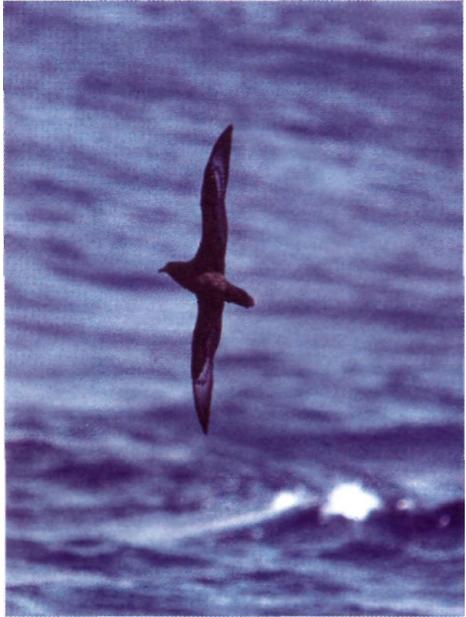
Brian Patteson

89. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.



Brian Patteson

90. Pale-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 2000.



Brian Patteson

91. Dark-morph Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, USA, August 1996. This individual is typical of about 70% of dark-morph Herald Petrels seen on pelagic trips off North Carolina.

although I have observed Herald Petrel flying low to the water, this was in windspeeds of less than ten knots. They do not tend to use the “fingers” on these occasions (as described here). In fact, if they do flap, the whole wing is used. Irrespective of the colour morph, this species, like other *Pterodroma*, does not need much of an excuse to start towering. I [am] surprised that, given the weather conditions described, the bird in Kent was not bouncing around. The speed of Herald Petrel can also be surprising. One observer noted the bird as “trailing a gannet”. Even into a strong head wind I would have expected the petrel to leave a Northern Gannet standing!

The record was recirculated around BBRC. With reference to the experts’ views on the flight, combined with the viewing conditions (at low level, from the back of a car in very windy weather), the collective view was that there was still sufficient uncertainty about this (admittedly remarkable) record which would leave it just below the standard required for acceptance. All the members expressed a degree of sympathy for the observers, who, through no fault of their own and in very difficult circumstances, did not quite see the petrel well enough.

What standards should we expect with records of rare seabirds?

BBRC used this circulation to stimulate a discussion of what should be expected of records of rare seabirds, especially if those records would constitute a ‘first for Britain’. During the past five years, there have been records of Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus* and Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*, both seen on seawatches, as well as numerous other seabird rarities, submitted to BBRC. Many members felt that standards for the acceptance of records of rare seabirds, and especially those involving potential ‘firsts’, must be as high as for other species. Indeed, it could be argued that, since most seabirds allow the observer only a short viewing time and little chance of a second look, and are often seen in poor weather conditions, we should expect a higher standard of submission before we accept them. Consider, for example, a ‘fly-by’ wader or a female duck. The field characteristics of these are often no less clear-cut than is the case with rare seabirds, and there is often less variation in plumage than occurs among many seabirds. Yet

would anyone seriously consider that we should accept as a first for Britain a record of an individual – perhaps an Asiatic Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* or a Spectacled Eider *Somateria fischeri* – which was seen only in flight for a couple of minutes in poor conditions half a kilometre away? Those species are no more easy to identify than are many rare seabirds, such as Little Shearwaters *Puffinus assimilis* (which are sometimes claimed confidently on such views).

BBRC also considered the question of the previous experience of the observers. With typical seawatching records, of birds seen briefly, at long distance and in poor conditions, previous experience of the species concerned is desirable and, for extreme rarities, such as the claimed Herald Petrel, a sound knowledge of the genus is almost a prerequisite for acceptance.

Many BBRC members commented that perhaps we need a change in our birding culture, to the point where pelagic trips become commonplace, despite the cost, and rare seabirds are photographed and fully documented. Cost does not prevent many British birders from travelling abroad, or to far-flung corners of Britain and Ireland, in pursuit of birds, so why should it prevent them from journeying out into the oceans? This is the norm in the USA, South Africa and Australia, so why should it be different here? Some members, however, felt that to expect the sort of documentation required in those countries was unreasonable, even though we have come to expect it for non-seabirds.

Despite concerns over documentation, records such as the one described here should not be lost even if they are *currently* unacceptable. They will help us to establish a picture of changing distribution and occurrence patterns, and, in years to come, may be reviewed and accepted in the light of new information. This has recently happened with ‘soft-plumaged petrels’, while pelagics in the Western Approaches have completely changed our perception of the occurrence of Wilson’s Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*. Consider how unlikely a record of Swinhoe’s Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis* seemed 15 years ago, yet we now have definite proof that this seabird does occur in British waters.

BBRC is keen to receive high-quality submissions of rare seabirds, to help us to establish

such patterns. Records like the one discussed here, although difficult and time-consuming, are also extremely instructive. BBRC appreciates that non-acceptance may be demoralising, but our view is that it is better to make a decision based on current knowledge and understanding than to allow a record to disappear into a long-term 'pending' category. We shall always be prepared to review such records in the light of new information on identification or patterns of occurrence.

Acknowledgments

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