

Notes on the Grey-mantled Albatross

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In view of the previous doubtful status of *Phoebastria palpebrata* on the Australian list, it is gratifying to record a specimen—concrete evidence that the species does, in fact, occasionally reach the southern coastline of Australia. While awaiting precise information on the circumstances surrounding the finding of the bird, it was thought desirable to publish a preliminary note (Hitchcock, 1950, 15). This information has now come to hand from the donor, Mr. Alan Miller, of Nelson, Victoria. In a letter dated July 25, 1950, he states—"The bird was picked up at about 12 noon on Sunday, July 2, on the water's edge of the beach of Discovery Bay, about half a mile east of the Glenelg River mouth. The albatross was quite fresh and appeared to have died on Saturday night, and am very sorry I gutted it. It had not been on the beach for long, as any birds are soon devoured by foxes, which are numerous along the beach. These are wind directions and force as given by the Nelson Post-Office: June 28 direction NW, force 7; June 29 direction SW, force 5; June 30 direction N, force 4; July 1 direction NNE, force 6; July 2 direction N, force 6. During the days mentioned we were having high seas."

It is incredible that wind forces of 4 to 7 (Beaufort Scale) could seriously impair the staying powers of such a superb flier as this species. One can only surmise that it became progressively exhausted, through inability to feed over a period of several days, and eventually succumbed.

Several writers have remarked on the high percentage of juveniles among beach derelicts, and the present specimen exemplifies this. Immaturity is suggested, first, by the over-all smaller dimensions, tabulated below, compared with those of adult skins; secondly, by the plumage characters of dorsal surface. The feathers of the hind neck, mantle and, to a lesser extent, scapulars, have a scalloped appearance due to the broad, pale-buff edgings. There is also a suggestion of mottling on the fore neck and chest. The lesser wing-coverts are decidedly brownish, with pale tips, and greatly abraded. The head appears dark by comparison with the back. Underparts ashy-grey, darker towards vent. The primary shafts are horn-coloured and the shafts of the rectrices white.

P. palpebrata, according to Murphy (1936, 505), does not have a distinctive juvenal plumage, the chicks moulting directly from the grey down into a plumage practically identical with that of adults. This is borne out by the nestling (B8073) from Heard Island, in which teleoptiles are appearing on the backs and wings. It would appear,

however, that, at least in first-year birds, this plumage is subject to much wear and fading, so that individuals in all stages of mottling may be seen.

Colours of soft parts, taken from the fresh specimen, were as follows: Iris dark brown; bill black, mandibular sulcus pale Paynes grey; feet pale smoke grey, webbing pale smoke grey basally, gradually darkening to mouse grey at extremities of web. As this bird had been gutted prior to receipt, sexing was impossible. Microscopic examination revealed nothing conclusive.

Nichols and Murphy (1914, 527) and Dabbene (1926, 318) have characterized some of the differences between the two species of *Phoebetria*. These may be summarized as follows—

palpebrata Culmen concave in profile; unguis relatively strong; sulcus pale blue in life, dark in skins. Adult plumage—pearly-grey back and underparts contrasting strongly with dark head, wings and tail; immature resembles adult, but first teleoptile plumage subject to rapid fading, giving a mottled or scalloped pattern on back scapulars.

fusca Culmen relatively straight in profile; unguis relatively weak; sulcus yellow in adult, violet in juvenile. Adult plumage almost uniform sooty-brown; immature similar, but with whitish-buff nape and collar.

Serventy and Whittell (1948, 109) were the first to draw attention to the violet sulcus in young *fusca*. In response to my enquiry on this point, Dr. Serventy (*in litt.*, 5/9/50) kindly informed me—"During the severe winter of 1945, when I was away in Melbourne at the time, two specimens of Sooty Albatrosses were received at the W.A. Museum each of which had a violet sulcus. They were considered to be *Phoebetria palpebrata*. However, when later Major Whittell and I examined them, together with the original one we found on the ocean beach the year previously, we came to the conclusion that all three specimens were really *P. fusca*. It appeared that the immature of this species had a blue or violet sulcus, though this fact had not been reported by anyone in the literature."

While it is interesting to speculate on the origin of the Nelson specimen, the enormous range of *P. palpebrata*, and the lack of comparable material from all breeding stations make it difficult to arrive at any firm conclusion. Murphy (1936, 498) gives its breeding range as "Antipodes, Campbell, Auckland, Macquarie, Kerguelen, Crozet, Prince Edward, and South Georgia Islands, and, in all probability, at Heard, Bouvet and the South Sandwich Islands." Falla

(1937, 134) found *palpebrata* nesting on Heard Island, and this had been abundantly confirmed by A.N.A.R.E. biologists in the last two years.

Following are the measurements (in millimetres) of all specimens of *P. palpebrata* in the National Museum of Victoria. The culmen was measured from its origin, i.e. length of total culmen, and the wing was *not* flattened. B3064 is a mount.

Reg. No.	Sex	Locality	Date	Culmen	Wing	Tarsus	Toe
R6023	♂ ad.	Macquarie Island	?	113	540	88	122
R6024	♂ ad.	Macquarie Island	?	112	525	86	126
B3062	♂ ad.	Heard Is.: S.W. Bay	20.2.50	112	515	86	129
B3063	♂ ad.	Heard Is.: S.W. Bay	20.2.50	112	520	88	120
B3064	♂ ad.	Heard Is.: West Bay	20.2.50	109	525	—	—
B3073	♂ nestl.	Heard Is.: S.W. Bay	20.2.50	84	—	70	95
B3074	—imm.	Victoria: Nelson	2.7.50	105	495	82	118

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Stray Feathers

Little Falcon and Bats.—In the Healesville district (Victoria), Little Falcons (*Falco longipennis*) nest, usually between the months of November and January. I have seen youngsters at the nest-leaving stage, within a quarter of a mile of my home, as late as February. The hunting activities of the parent birds in this particular case (in an old nest of Ravens) have provided some wonderful examples of sheer speed, judgment and boldness.

At dusk one summer evening I happened to be watching the exit of a colony of chocolate bats (*Chalinolobus gouldii*) by ones and twos from the lofty pipe hollow of a candle bark eucalypt and, of the forty or more in this 'battery,'