



Royal Albatross, Bellambi, N.S.W., July 1960

Photo by J. D. Gibson

First Australian Record of the Royal Albatross

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The Royal Albatross (*Diomedea epomophora*) is now known to occur as a rare visitor to Australia on the evidence of a specimen captured off the New South Wales coast and described below.

The bird was caught on July 17, 1960, during banding activities by the N.S.W. Albatross Study Group. It was taken ashore and locked in a boatshed until banding operations were finished for the day, then it was photographed, measured, examined in detail and banded before being released. The precise locality of capture was one mile offshore at Bellambi, N.S.W. ($34^{\circ} 20' \text{ S.}$, $150^{\circ} 50' \text{ E.}$).

The known breeding grounds of the Royal Albatross are the Chatham, Auckland, and Campbell Islands, all of which are in the New Zealand region. A few pairs also nest on the mainland near Dunedin (South Island). The distribution of the species covers the coastal waters of the North and South Islands, the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of South America northwards to about 30° south latitude, and the intervening waters of the southern Pacific Ocean.

In common with some other New Zealand sea-birds, the habit of the Royal Albatross is to fly to the east of its breeding grounds in the direction of South America. On the basis of specimens collected and on sight observations it was thought at one time that the species probably nested in the South American region but no such breeding place has been discovered. So consistently do the birds fly eastwards that, until now, there were no authentic records for Australia, which is much closer to New Zealand than is South America.

The Royal Albatross resembles the adult Wandering Albatross (*D. exulans*) so closely that it could have occurred in Australian waters without being recognized as a distinct species. However, there is no doubt that it is an extremely rare visitor to eastern Australia as indicated by the fact that only one example has been captured by the Albatross Study Group during four seasons of banding. In this period well over 1,000 Wandering Albatrosses have been handled.

The chief characters by which the Royal Albatross (see Plate 10) can be separated from the Wandering Albatross (in adult plumage) are definite enough, though they are not of much help when the birds are observed in flight. The three main points are (1) the black line along the cutting edge of the bill (absent on *exulans*); (2) the shape of the nasal tubes which are swollen, rounded, and more prominent than in *exulans*; (3) the black colour of the eyelids (pale in *exulans*). The black line on the cutting edge of the bill can be seen at close range but the bird must be actually handled to note the other points mentioned.

The following measurements were taken: exposed culmen 167 mm; tip of bill to narial opening 125 mm; depth of bill

at nares 52 mm; narrowest depth of bill 35 mm; tarsus 128 mm; middle toe and claw 176 mm; wing 635 mm; tail 197 mm; wingspan 9 ft. 10½ in.

The head and body plumage was white except for isolated feathers on the back, which were finely barred with brown; similar markings were evident on most of the scapulars. A few of the rectrices were either tipped with black or barred. Except for pale edges to some of the larger coverts, the upper wing was entirely dark.

The *Checklist of New Zealand Birds* (1953) recognizes two subspecies of the Royal Albatross—*epomophora* from Auckland and Campbell Islands, and *sanfordi* from the Chatham Islands and Taiaroa Heads (Dunedin). The former is larger and, when adult, generally shows some difference in plumage between the sexes. The dimensions and plumage of the Australian-taken example, when compared with data available for both *epomophora* and *sanfordi*, point to the probability that it is an immature bird of the subspecies *epomophora*.

A paper entitled "Field identification and sex determination of the Royal Albatross" by K. Westerskov, together with a fine series of photographs, has been published in *Notornis*, vol. 9, no. 1, July 1960, pp. 1-6, pls. 1-8.

An Oriental Cuckoo in New South Wales.—The Oriental Cuckoo (*Cuculus saturatus*) is seldom seen in New South Wales and recorded observations are very few. On February 25, 1961, at Fosterton, near Dungog, one was under observation throughout the afternoon but it could not be found on subsequent days. The bird was in a narrow strip of rain-forest type timber adjoining the open flats of the Williams River.

In general appearance, flight and habits, it bore a marked resemblance to the Pallid Cuckoo (*C. pallidus*). The head and back were grey, the wings a dark grey. The throat was grey but the remainder of the underparts were white barred with black. The tail, which was faintly marked with white overall, was grey on the basal half, a darker grey on the remaining half, and the tip was white. There was a faint yellow mark around the eyes and the feet and legs were also yellow. The bill was black. The overall length was about 12 inches.—W. McK. DOWLING, Bandon Grove, N.S.W.