

SHORT NOTES

Albatross names

In 1993, D.G. Medway (1993) and I (Bourne 1993) agreed in *Notornis* that the description of the Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*) by Linnaeus must apply to the large southern form of that (super)species. It may be timely to enlarge on the subject since this is ignored in a recent review of the classification of the Diomedidae by Robertson and Nunn (1998). It is in fact possible to deduce a little more about the fate of the earliest specimen mentioned by Linnaeus, a skull described and figured by Nehemiah Grew (Medway 1993), since the collection in which this specimen was contained was eventually transferred to the British Museum in 1781 (Lyons 1944). The Natural History Museum still retains much of the botanical and some mammal and fossil material, though none of the birds is known to have survived (British Museum 1904-1912). Frank Steinheimer informs me that although the earliest surviving "vellum" register of birds started in 1837 already lists seven Wandering Albatross skulls, all but one are still present, and differ from Grew's figure (Medway 1993).

While few birds skins collected before the introduction of preservatives about 1800 lasted many decades (Morris 1993), bones are more durable, as with the head and leg of the famous 17th century Oxford Dodo *Raphus cucullatus*. I have already suggested (Bourne 1989) that the most likely final destination for the durable parts of the lost British Museum specimens seems the great anatomical collection started by John Hunter in the late 18th century now at the Royal College of Surgeons. Owen (1855) in fact records it once contained some bird specimens obtained by exchange from the British Museum, including heads with bill plates of the Great Auk *Pinguinus impennis* and Razorbill *Alca impennis*, [= *Alca torda*] and many more supplied by "Dr Leach FLS", presumably the Assistant Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum between 1813-1822 (British Museum 1904-1912; Mearns and Mearns 1988), which were unfortunately destroyed by bombing in World War II.

Since, although we arrive at the conclusion by different routes, the southern origin of nominate *Diomedea exulans* appears to be one of the few things Medway and I agreed about, it seems strange that Robertson and Nunn (1998) still attribute a northern origin to this form, which they treat as a distinct species, without further discussion, especially when Nunn and Stanley (1998) accept a southern origin elsewhere. Is it really wise to split up allopatric populations of Diomedidae only differing in minor details of size, colour or breeding season, with much overlap, into separate species, also switching vernacular names (Bourne and Warham 1999)? If so, is it then really desirable to try to restrict vernacular names formerly used in a wide sense, such as Wandering and Royal Albatross, to more limited populations? This seems a recipe for confusion.