

SHORT NOTE

A very white-chinned petrel (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*) off Kaikoura

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An unusually well-marked white-chinned petrel (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*) was seen at close range from an Albatross Encounter commercial seabird-watching vessel off the Kaikoura coast on 1 Jun 2008. Based on bill characters the bird was an adult, and it was in worn plumage. In addition to white feathers at the lower base of the mandible, the bird had asymmetrical 1.5 cm diameter patches of white feathers on each cheek, contiguous with the smaller mandibular patch (Fig 1a). Viewed from the front, the patches formed a broad crescent extending to below each eye (Fig. 1b). This was markedly different from the very limited white feathering typical of white-chinned petrels in the New Zealand region (Figs 1c & d), including another bird seen on the same day.

I have never seen such extensive white feathering among thousands of white-chinned petrels in New Zealand waters, on Antipodes Is, between Australia and Antarctica, and in the South Atlantic and Scotia Sea. Other than the closely related spectacled petrel (*P. conspicillata*) that breeds on Inaccessible Is, Tristan da Cunha group (South Atlantic), extensive white facial feathering on white-chinned petrels is mainly recorded within populations breeding on the Kerguelen and Crozet Is in the southern Indian Ocean (Hall 1900, Mathews 1910-27, Falla 1937, Shirihai 2007, Sandy Bartle and Jean-Claude Stahl, *pers. comm.*; Fig 2). New Zealand breeding white-chinned petrels have often been treated as a separate subspecies *P. aequinoctialis stedi* (e.g. Fleming 1953, Kinsky 1970 & 1980), but most recent publications

have ignored geographic variation other than *P. conspicillata* (e.g. Marchant & Higgins 1990, Turbott 1990).

The rarity of white-chinned petrels with extensive white feathering in the New Zealand region was confirmed by researchers familiar with the species. Elizabeth Bell, Graeme Elliott, Mark Fraser, Mike Imber, Paul Sagar, Graeme Taylor, Alan Tennyson, David Thompson and Kath Walker (*pers. comm.*) had not seen such well-marked birds at their breeding grounds on Antipodes Is or at sea. Graeme Elliott and Kath Walker had not seen any so marked on Disappointment or Adams Is (their breeding grounds within the Auckland Is), and the few birds handled on a stack off Campbell Is also had small chin patches (Graeme Taylor, *pers. comm.*). None of the 1091 white-chinned petrels examined from fisheries by-catch in New Zealand waters up to 2008 had a chin patch as large as the bird seen off Kaikoura (Elizabeth Bell, Mark Fraser, Christopher Robertson and Paul Scofield, *pers. comm.*), and there are no such birds in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa collection (Alan Tennyson, *pers. comm.*). I consider that the bird seen on 1 Jun 2008 had most likely come from a population in the southern Indian Ocean.

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Fig. 1. A & B, White-chinned petrel, Kaikoura, 1 Jun 2008 (photos C. Miskelly); C & D, White-chinned petrel, Kaikoura, 24 Oct 2008 (photos D. Watson).

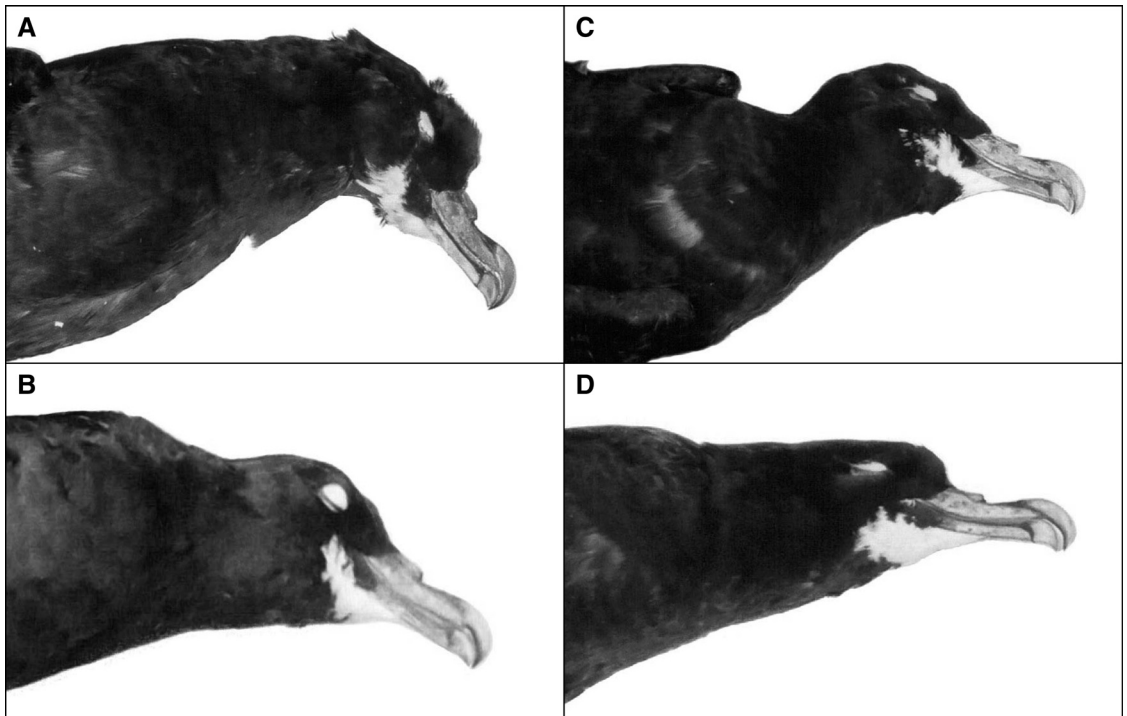
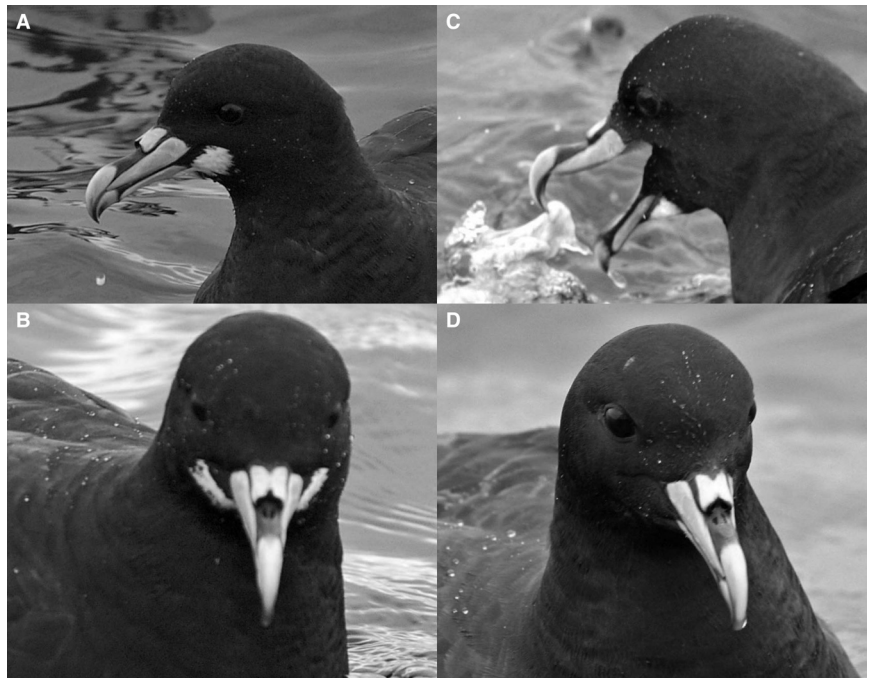


Fig. 2. Examples of skins of white-chinned petrels from breeding locations in the southern Indian Ocean (all photos C. Robertson). A, male, Possession Is, Crozet Is, 17 Dec 1907 (British Museum of Natural History, 1909.11.16.5); B, male, Possession Is, Crozet Is, 25 Oct 1968 (Collections de Mammifères et Oiseaux du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle de Paris, 1969-959); C, female, Kerguelen Is, date unknown (BMNH 76.4.26.5); D, male, Kerguelen Is, date unknown (BMNH 80.11.18.669).

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