

SHORT NOTE

A vagrant Buller's albatross (*Thalassarche bulleri*) in Uruguayan shelf waters: northernmost record in the Southwest Atlantic

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Buller's albatross (*Thalassarche bulleri*) is a New Zealand breeding endemic, with colonies distributed on four island groups (Onley & Scofield 2007; ACAP 2009). The breeding population is estimated to be of about 32,000 pairs, about half of which are concentrated on the Chatham Islands and the remaining on the Snares and Solander Islands, and Rosemary Rock in the Three Kings Islands (ACAP 2009; Birdlife International 2018). Juveniles and non-breeding adults migrate across the Pacific Ocean to feed in the Humboldt Current off Chile and Peru, where Buller's albatross occurs frequently (Stahl & Sagar 2000; Spear *et al.* 2003). Contrastingly, there are only a handful of records of Buller's albatrosses in the Atlantic Ocean. It is a rare vagrant in South African waters, where there are six records of birds observed around fishing trawlers operating to the south-west of Cape Point (August 1995, November 2003, November 2008) and to the south of Cape Agulhas (October 2005, October 2010, May 2016) (Ertel & Rose 1997; Ryan 2017; Trevor Hardaker *pers. comm.*). In the Southwest Atlantic Ocean, there are just three reports of its presence, all of them from sub-Antarctic latitudes. The first one corresponds to three individuals

observed on 28 March 1987 at the southern entrance to the Falkland's Sound (Curtis 1988). The other two records were located farther south; a single bird was recorded on 5 March 2012 north of Orkney Island (59°39'S, 45°49'W; Orgeira *et al.* 2013), and another single individual was spotted on 15 December 2012 associating with a fishing vessel off the southernmost Atlantic coast of Argentina (55°06'S, 66°06'W; Tamini & Chavez 2014). Here, we provide information on the first occurrence of Buller's albatross in Uruguayan waters, bringing evidence that vagrant individuals of this species venture northwards into the Southwestern Atlantic.

On 8 October 2015, a Buller's albatross was observed from the research vessel RV *Aldebarán*, while it was conducting a demersal fisheries survey over the outer continental shelf within the Uruguayan Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (between 50 and 300 m depth). The albatross had a grey head and neck, which contrasted with the white breast, forehead, and crown. A dark smudge was present in front of the eyes, as well as a clearly visible white crescent behind and below the eyes. The bill had black latericorns and vivid yellow maxillary unguis and culmen, which was broadly rounded at the base. The presence of yellow lines along the lower margins of the ramicorn was also obvious. The underwing had a broad, well-defined black band at the leading edge, widest at

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the axilla. All these features, visible on Figures 1 and 2, indicate that the bird was an adult Buller's albatross (Harper & Kinsky 1974; Onley & Scofield 2007; Howell 2009). The almost white forehead and prominent front of crown (visible on several of the photographs obtained during the sightings) indicate that this individual was a southern Buller's albatross (*T. b. bulleri*).

The individual was initially spotted at 1558 h, 150 km south-east (35°49.32'S, 53°19.46'W) of La Paloma. Water depth was 115 m and SST was 11.8°C. When first observed, the bird was sitting on the surface roughly 50 m ahead of the vessel, which was conducting a trawl. After the initial detection, the individual was tracked as it mingled between several tens of other seabirds. It continued to be associated with the vessel during the remaining tow time, net hauling operation, and then at least for 15 minutes more while the vessel was on transit towards the next sampling station, to be conducted next morning. The bird was last seen at 1645 h. Individuals of at least twelve other seabird species were attending the vessel when the Buller's albatross was observed, including wandering-type albatross (*Diomedea exulans* sensu lato), southern royal albatross (*Diomedea epomophora*), northern royal albatross (*Diomedea sanfordi*), black-browed albatross (*Thalassarche melanophris*), Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*), shy-type albatross (*Thalassarche cauta/steadii*), white-chinned petrel (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*), spectacled petrel (*Procellaria conspicillata*), cape petrel (*Daption capense*), great shearwater (*Ardenna gravis*), sooty shearwater (*Ardenna grisea*), and Wilson's storm petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*).

The next day, a Buller's albatross was sighted again early in the morning (0719 h), while the vessel was hauling the trawl net, 16 km east (35°50.59'S, 53°08.51'W) of the previous sighting. Water depth was 145 m and SST was 13.1°C. While this observation was brief (it lasted less than two minutes) it was possible to obtain several photographs, which allowed us to determine that it was most likely the same individual observed the day before, based on some matching markings related to worn plumage, moulting feathers (symmetrically moulting an inner primary) and a small greenish smear in the base of the unguis (Fig. 2). There were at least nine other seabird species associated to the vessel during this second observation of Buller's albatross, including wandering-type albatross, northern royal albatross, black-browed albatross, Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross, northern giant petrel (*Macronektes halli*), white-chinned petrel, cape petrel, great shearwater, and Wilson's storm petrel.

The sightings reported here establish the first record of Buller's albatross for Uruguayan waters and constitute the northernmost records in the Southwest Atlantic Ocean. The closest records of

this species in the Atlantic Ocean (Curtis 1988) were situated at roughly 1,900 kilometres to the south. While several hundreds of seabird counts have been done both from longline and trawl vessels operating over the Uruguayan shelf and slope during the last 15 years (Jiménez *et al.* 2011, 2012, *unpubl. data*), this species was never recorded before. Over five hundred seabird counts have been done since the observations reported here, but no further Buller's albatross has been recorded (*unpubl. data*). These facts highlight the rareness of this species in the region and suggest that only vagrant individuals reach Uruguayan waters.



Figure 1. Buller's Albatross observed in Uruguayan waters on 8 October 2015.



Figure 2. Buller's Albatross (probably the same individual) observed on two consecutive days (8 & 9 October 2015).

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