

Sooty Shearwater in Tasmania

By M. S. R. SHARLAND, Hobart, Tas.

On January 27, 1946, a Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) was captured at a nesting burrow on Tasman Island, off the extreme south-eastern tip of Tasmania, by Irvine Jacobs, son of the head light-keeper there, and later the specimen was presented to the Tasmanian Museum, Hobart.

Receipt of the specimen—the first of the species to be obtained by the Museum—was the result of efforts extending over two or three years to decide the problem raised by Wood Jones in his statement, in 1936, that "it seems . . . safe to affirm that, even with our present insufficient knowledge of the specific variations of the Tubinares, there is breeding on Tasman Island, a shearwater that is larger than our familiar *P. tenuirostris* and which falls within the specific diagnosis of *P. griseus*" (1).

Wood Jones commented on the absence of the name of *P. griseus* from the books on Tasmanian birds by Littler and Lord and Scott, as well as from *An Australian Bird Book* by Leach, stating that the omission from the last-named book was all the more remarkable in that Leach claimed to include all the birds met with in Victoria and Victorian waters; yet *P. griseus*, says Wood Jones, will nearly always be found among the numerous examples of *P. tenuirostris* which are at times strewn along the southern Australian coast.

Nevertheless, there have been no skins in the Tasmanian collection taken in Tasmania or elsewhere, nor are there any local breeding records, except the indication by Wood Jones already referred to, and the one which is the subject of this paper.

The bird was taken at a burrow on top of the island, and when captured, according to Jacobs, "disgorged a fish 6 inches long." He also informed me that there is a small community of the birds on the island, the breeding colonies generally being separated from those of *P. tenuirostris*. In one spot, amongst the turf, he counted some 30 burrows; in another spot, three or four; and in a third place, he estimated there were a dozen or so. The colonies are situate near the highest point of the island, which rises for nearly 900 feet, with practically sheer cliffs all around. In places the cliffs are tiered, and in the turf-covered sloping top of each 'step' there are burrows of *P. tenuirostris*, but, as far as is ascertained, none of *P. griseus*.

To distinguish it from the somewhat smaller common Mutton-bird (*P. tenuirostris*) Jacobs and the other persons who live on the island, know *P. griseus* as the 'king mutton-bird.'

The young of the Sooty Shearwater, Jacobs says, can be

distinguished from that of the Short-tailed Shearwater by long dark grey down which is light grey underneath the body, whilst the nesting burrow is said to be bigger and longer, although at times an egg will be found under thick vegetation.

"The Sooty Shearwater is very closely allied to the Short-tailed Shearwater, but is distinguishable by its larger size and by the white patch on the under surface of the wing." This general description of the species, given by Oliver (2), fits the bird well, judging by the specimen I examined and by illustrations, for in average measurement it exceeds the size of *P. tenuirostris*, and the white marking beneath each wing is prominent. It is featured by Godman in an illustration of the species in flight (3), although he also figures a second bird with legs and feet orange-yellow, which is incorrect, as the legs are dark brownish grey and feet bluish grey.

Measurements of the Tasman Island specimen are—Total length of body 450 mm.; wing 290; length of culmen 43, breadth 15; length of tail 100; tarsus 58. As the bird had been cleaned on capture, sex determination was not possible.

The Sooty Shearwater is the common 'mutton-bird' of New Zealand, and Oliver gives a good description of its breeding habits and its economic status. The young are taken for food, as with those of the Short-tailed Shearwater in Tasmania, but apparently the New Zealand industry is not on so extensive a scale, as that in the local Bass Strait islands.

Alexander (4) gives the range of the species as Pacific and Atlantic oceans to Kamchatka, Alaska, Labrador, Greenland and the Faroë Islands. As well as on the southern part of New Zealand and Stewart Island, it breeds on the Snares, Chatham, and Auckland islands. Mathews (5), listing it under the name *Neonectris* (*Paranectris*) *griseus*, records its distribution as 'New Zealand and East Australian seas,' but does not specify breeding localities.

It is definite now that Tasman Island can be accepted as a breeding site of *P. griseus*, and, in fact, is the only known breeding station of the species in Australian waters. Reports that it also breeds on Maatsuyker Island, south of Tasmania, have not been confirmed.

REFERENCES

1. Jones, Frederic Wood 'The Breeding of the Sooty Shearwater (*puffinus griseus*) on Tasman Is.,' *Sth. Aust. Orn.*, vol. 13, pt. 7, July 1936, pp. 197-200.
2. Oliver, W. R. B. *New Zealand Birds*, 1930, p. 122.
3. Godman, F. Du Cane *A Monograph of the Petrels*, March 1908, pl. 38, pt. 2.
4. Alexander, W. B. *Birds of the Ocean*, 1928, pp. 38-39.
5. Mathews, Gregory M. *A Working List of Australian Birds including the Australian Quadrant and New Zealand*, 1946, p. 6.