# CORRESPONDENCE

## IDENTIFICATION OF PRIONS

Sir,—In his paper 'The Petrels of the Indian Ocean' (Sea Swallow 13: 26-39) W. R. P. Bourne has written regarding prions *Pachyptila* spp.: '. . . identification of this group can rarely be relied upon even when they come from museums'. Falla, Sibson and Turbott in *A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* echoed this problem, but suggested that the extreme species, the Broad-billed Prion *P. vittata* and the Fairy Prion *P. turtur*, 'are distinguishable at sea'. Over many years, members of the Royal Naval Bird Watching Society and other mariners who have watched this genus of petrels have acknowledged the serious difficulties of sight, as opposed to in-the-hand, identifications of individual species. For my part, I have many observations of prions off southern Australia and New Zealand with identification taken to generic level; I have watched what seems most likely to have been *P. vittata* through the periscope of a submerged submarine at ranges of 5 or 6 m while they were feeding in the Tasman Sea. I have not been certain that I have identified at sea a species of prion by sight alone in approximately 300 observations.

There seems to be overwhelming evidence of the great difficulty of specific identification of these petrels. In view of this, the value of H. L. Secker's observations in his 'Procellariiformes in Cook Strait, New Zealand' (Emu 69: 155-160) might have been improved had the means and details of identification been included in the paper. Were the identifications obtained by observations solely from a boat? Did Mr Secker collect or obtain specimens from the several flocks of 1,000 birds, and then infer that the remainder were *P. turtur*? How did the observer distinguish *P. vittata* for certain when on another date he identified the very similar *P. salvini*? Indeed, how was *salvini* identified? Because the observer was apparently certain of the presence of *P. turtur*, can other workers infer the absence in winter of other species of prion in the Cook Strait from the lack of appropriate records, seeing that, of 47 days of observation, 17 occurred in the period April to September and that all the species have been recorded in New Zealand according to Falla *et al.*

At the end of the paper 'First records of waders in Tasmania' by D. G. Thomas (Emu 69: 136), the Editor's footnote stresses the requirements for a critical appraisal of unusual records. Specific identifications of prions without specimens in the hand constitute unusual records in my view. I suggest with all due respect to the Editor of Emu that more details are required for these records to be in accordance with the policy given in his footnote.

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Mr Secker has commented on this letter as follows:

The difficulties of identification of prions are generally recognized and Lt Cdr Norris's remarks are interesting and useful because they stress these difficulties again. However, very large numbers of *P. turtur* breed on the Brothers, Stephens and Trio Islands in Cook Strait. Therefore it is usually assumed, legitimately in my opinion, that prions seen at sea in Cook Strait are almost all *turtur*, unless there are good reasons based on plumage, size and shape of birds seen close to boats to think otherwise. No doubt this aspect of the observations ought to have been stated in the article and the records likewise qualified.

[*Touché*: Ed.]