

## The Specific Name of the Little Shearwater

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Our views on the validity of the name *Puffinus assimilis* for the Little Shearwater as set out in *The Emu*, vol. 52, p. 17, are not seriously challenged by any evidence given by Dr. J. M. Harrison and Captain C. H. B. Grant in their contribution (*The Emu*, vol. 53, p. 73). But their remarks about the non-correspondence of Gould's description of the tarsus and the real colour in the live bird represent an interpretation of the *Règles* that would cause havoc in many animal groups if generally adopted. In the case of petrels with coloured legs and bills, the dried study skins are a trap to the taxonomist, unless accompanied by the collector's field data. Such colours may change materially, accounting for understandable errors in the original descriptions. Years may elapse before such mistakes are detected and corrected. Thus it was almost a century before the correct colouring was published of the legs of the Gould Petrel (*Pterodroma leucoptera*), of Cabbage Tree Island, N.S.W. Gould described the legs as white, and various coloured plates showed them as yellow or reddish (the latter being the colour given in Mathews' *Birds of Australia*). Actually the true colour is light grey-blue. If such defects in the original descriptions automatically disqualify names, even though the species is readily identifiable from other parts of the description, locality, etc., then, in addition to the Gould Petrel, at least two other Australian and New Zealand petrels must be re-named. The Great-winged Petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera*), with jet black legs, was described as having the legs 'brunneis' (and a wing length which Mathews himself had to dismiss as one "I cannot reconcile with the facts," *Birds Aust.*, vol. 2, p. 136). The original description of the Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) included the phrase "pedibus anterius ex virescente cinereis" though the legs in life are greyish black with a mauve tone on the inner side of the tarsus. Even the name of the Tasmanian Mutton-bird (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) will have to be discarded by the purists as the original description of the legs reads 'pieds brunâtres'.

*Puffinus griseus* is on the British List, so Dr. Harrison and Capt. Grant will have to face up to this issue. With a diligent search of the literature they may find still other instances of birds on the British List to be re-named for similar reasons, and, if they feel inclined to extend their studies, very many extra-limital forms. But this would be a barren enterprise. It is unfortunate that his fellow members of the B.O.U. List Committee took Mathews seriously when he started the *assimilis* hare amongst them.