

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## ALBATROSS COMMENT

To the Editor.

Dear Sir,

Might I comment on J. B. Cox's article (S.A. Ornith. Vol. 26, pp. 67-75) wherein he states "In fact, Robinson's findings are undoubtedly atypical of the comparative status of *chrysostoma*." Is this really justified? That it was the most common albatross found during the period of my survey there is no doubt. Surely, then it was not amiss to point out that this differed from Condon's classification. A recent check of specimen records for South Australia gave the following totals,—Wanderers 10, Black-browed 10, Yellow-nosed 16, Grey-headed 12 and the White-capped 4. Condon (1968) also lists some others of this species apparently not preserved as skins. This does not indicate that *chrysostoma* is more rare than most others. Two other old sightings also support this contention. McGillivray (Emu 19, p. 175 "Notes on Sea-birds") recorded *chrysostoma* when approaching Adelaide from the Great Australian Bight. After leaving Adelaide to resume the voyage to Melbourne, it was the first albatross to be seen.

Gould (1865 "Handbook to the Birds of Australia" Vol. 2, p. 436) who collected specimens of sea-birds on his voyages said of *chrysostoma* "this species appears to be more plentiful in the Australian seas than elsewhere; numbers came under my notice during a voyage from Launceston to Adelaide, particularly off Cape Jervis and Cape Northumberland."

It is also pertinent to note that the indications of my survey were similar to those of Learmonth's (1966 "Birds of the Portland (Victoria) District") whose effort covered a much longer period. He recorded nine beach-washed *chrysostoma* in 1959, indicating it to be one of the more common albatrosses washed up during his survey.

While I acknowledge the limitations of assessing sea-bird status from beach-derelicts, at least such evidence is positive. Cox in his article gave no indication of how he dealt with problems such as birds repeatedly flying past a given point, identification from a distance and limited vision. His graph also gave no indica-

tion of actual numbers or percentages of specimen records compared to sight records, but one gains the impression that it is heavily reliant on his own sight records. This being the case, then the graph is heavily biased with sight records from the Waitpinga observation area and not for South Australian waters as a whole, as the sub-title suggests. This is even more apparent when the graph is compared with the observations of Swanson in the same part. Cox's paucity of records for *cauta* throughout the whole year and the gaps in *chlororhynchos* records are shown by Swanson's writings to be unreal.

Cox also conjectures that a pale-headed *chrysostoma* from Goolwa Beach had faded because it was a dead bird, after previously acknowledging that *chrysostoma* at three or four years of age could be pale-headed. Actually, five of the six birds found were reasonably fresh; the eyes of most had not even shrunk and the eye colour was able to be clearly ascertained. It therefore seems unlikely that the plumage would have faded and also suggests that the birds had not drifted for long distances.

It is hard to understand how, after having observed only three *chrysostoma*, Cox is able to make criticisms of experienced sea-bird authorities on such a variable subject as the underwing pattern of *chrysostoma*. It seems ironical that, after having placed great emphasis on underwing pattern, he then concludes on page 73, "very rarely are albatrosses identifiable in the field by head colour and underwing patterns alone." He places identification more on bill and size (both factors which I drew attention to with regard to *chrysostoma* and *chlororhynchos*), comparative shape and "finer points" on which he failed to elaborate.

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(The editor is not responsible for views expressed in letters.)