

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor,  
Dear Sir,

Ross D. Robinson's comments (Albatross Comment, Letter to the Editor, *S. Aust. Orn.*, 26, 169) relating to my paper (Ibid, 26, 67-75) call for rebuttals.

1. He asks whether the remark "In fact Robinson's findings are undoubtedly atypical of the comparative status of *chrysostoma*" is really justified. I think it is, and I believe it also applies to his letter in which he again judges status on the basis of a small number of beach derelicts. The finding of only six Grey-headed in 15 months does indicate that they are rare,

as Condon (*A Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, 19) says. Condon's accounts are representative of records extending over at least 72 years, and include sight records. Because Robinson failed to take full account of the other species present in the coastal waters of his survey area, along with the short time of his survey, he had no basis for comparison.

2. The totals of specimens obtained in this state which Robinson gives, are incorrect and incomplete. Some of the specimens he includes have been found to be mis-identified. It will be improper to elaborate further here, but a full account will be given in a forthcoming paper. (Cox, in preparation.)

3. His letter indicates a "contention" that the Grey-headed is as common as other albatrosses in South Australian waters. This cannot be seriously considered until he researches more thoroughly by accounting for all references along with the two old ones he cited, examines specimen records objectively and observes for himself the species at sea.

4. An account of other records, apart from specimens, listed by Condon is given. These are unacceptable because of mistaken identification as I will show in a forthcoming paper. (Cox, in preparation.)

5. Macgillivray (*Emu* 19, 162-176) is cited as an authority to support the "contention," yet in Robinson's Goolwa list (*S. Aust. Orn.*, 26, 18-22) all sightings of Sooty Albatrosses, therefore including Macgillivray's, are queried (P.19). It seems "ironic" that while Macgillivray showed that he could even differentiate immatures of this species, Robinson doubts these and yet accepts the accounts of the Grey-headed which Macgillivray shows, by his notes, were not identified correctly. Mathews (*Emu*, 20, 38) disputes Macgillivray's identification of the latter species. Even if these sightings of the Grey-headed were acceptable, they certainly would not support Robinson's "contention" because only three were recorded (P.175) and they certainly were not common as Robinson implies by elaborate wording.

6. Gould's (*Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, 2, 436) account of Grey-headed is quoted by Robinson to support his "contention." In my opinion, the records are undoubtedly a result of mis-identification. Gould only collected three Grey-headed on his voyage, one from Tasmania and two, as Mathews shows, could have come from any part of the Southern Ocean. (*Emu* 19, 297-298.)

7. Robinson says Learmonth's survey indicates similarities. Since he used the same methods this is to be expected but Grey-headed are nevertheless rare in Victoria. (Simpson, 1972, *Birds in Bass Strait*.)

8. He says his evidence is at "least positive." However for judgements of status it is not "positive" because beach-washed specimens provide "positive" evidence only in that a particular species has occurred at a particular locality. They do not provide "positive" evidence that that species occurs more commonly in the surrounding seas than others because different species are subject to various environmental pressures which do not affect all of them in the same ways. Robinson's Goolwa

list shows (e.g. four yellow-nosed found on the one date only) that beach derelicts are not random samples of the birds at sea as would be required in order to make judgements of comparative status.

9. The numbers given in my paper are questioned. There were limits to the scope of that paper and in reference to a paper in preparation it was pointed out (P.67) that ". . . special attention will be given to the methods used to estimate numbers correctly." The numbers quoted were absolute minimums as is supported by later records, consideration was given to birds repeatedly flying past a given point. This will be shown in a forthcoming paper.

10. It is difficult to see how Robinson can imply problems like "identification from a distance and limited vision" are existent when he does not do the same work as I do. However this is irrelevant because no birds were positively identified unless diagnostic characters were seen, and most birds were seen at close range, even eye-markings often being visible.

11. Questions are raised why specimens and sight records were not listed separately. Apart from specimens being selected individuals and thus not providing a true account of comparative status as shown above, they were only included to avoid the suggestion of bias.

12. It is said my sight records heavily influence the graph. They do, so do those of many other observers, so do specimen records.

13. He implies a false geographical scope to the graph was given. This is not so, the scope of the graph was clearly given (P.74, Para. 3, lines 7-10).

14. The "paucity of records" and "gaps" in the graph were stated to be "unreal." They are "unreal." There were no known records to fill them. Surely Robinson did not expect supposition to be included.

15. Robinson implies Swanson's account (*S. Aust. Orn.* 26, 75-77) shows the graph to be "unreal." Why did not Robinson say that Swanson found the Black-browed to be the most numerous, the Yellow-nosed probably next, the Shy probably next and the Grey-headed ". . . to be rare . . . usually see only two or three individuals each year." This is what the graph shows.

16. Robinson endeavours to indicate the condition of his specimens when found. He still does not say that he actually obtained a fresh "adult" Grey-headed with a "whitish head." It is irrelevant as to whether he did because

my paper showed birds with extremely worn plumage can appear as such (P.72), it also showed birds may "... possess characters making field identification extremely difficult." This however does not prevent the vast majority of birds from being easily identified.

17. He says that I conjectured that his birds had faded. That they could have faded I would regard as fair comment because plumage on dead birds does fade, even within hours after death, (Serventy, *Emu*, 40, 403-408).

18. He questions why I commented on Grey-headed Albatrosses he quoted in his Goolwa list as "adult" with a "whitish head." My paper showed immatures have whitish heads. He synonymised three or four year old birds and his quoted "adult" in the letter. These are not adult, Tickell says that "... Grey-headed Albatrosses with fully developed head plumage and bill colour were therefore probably seven or eight years old and older." (*Ibis*, 111, 102-105.)

19. Robinson tries to indicate his birds had not drifted. Undoubtedly they had been subject to drift from out of their normal range, as Grey-headed seen by me undoubtedly were. This subject forms a major portion of my forthcoming paper (Cox, in preparation).

20. Robinson says I had "... observed only three *chrysostoma*." This is not so. At the time of writing I had seen considerably more, and not only in this region. My paper quoted records for one year only, moreover it shows (P.74, Para. 2, line 25) that I had seen more. It helped, but it was irrelevant whether I had seen any, because my paper showed I had considered other substantiating material.

21. He remarks on my alleged criticisms of experienced seabird authorities. This is unfounded because it was shown (P.64, Para. 4) that only one now outdated authority essentially differed from the summarisation given of the underwing pattern of the Grey-headed Albatross.

22. Robinson says underwing patterns are a "variable subject." It is proved that what my paper shows is correct. (Warham, Bourne and Elliott, *British Birds* 59, 376-385.)

23. He misreads a conclusionary paragraph to a chapter discussing underwing patterns. My paper says (P.72) the underwing pattern of "*chrysostoma* resembles *melanophrys*, and differs from *chlororhynchos* which resembles *bulleri*."

It then states that the former two "... must be told apart by head colour, bill colour, size and shape." The differences between the latter two were given on P.68. Thus obviously other characters are to be considered before forming an identification. The conclusionary paragraph Robinson referred to said, "*chrysostoma* and *chlororhynchos* can be told apart in the field by their different underwing patterns." Later in the same paragraph, but when not referring only to these two species, but to all albatrosses, it said as he quoted, "very rarely are albatrosses identifiable in the field by head colour and underwing patterns alone," the italics are now added. It certainly did not say as Robinson implied, that the Grey-headed and Yellow-nosed have to be told apart by the bill, size, etc.

24. If Robinson re-reads the summary given to identification he will realise it says, "The most important things to check are the bill colour, head (including facial) colour and the underwing pattern." He will also realise I elaborated on all "finer points" which were beyond the scope of the paragraph he criticised.

25. Finally, might I say that my records of albatrosses in South Australia extend from 1968 until the present, not just over a period of 15 months like Robinson's. He has no idea what records I have of seabirds until I publish, or of what I have previously observed. Prior to 1968 I had observed many species in other countries for many years. I do not consider it good practice to publish with insufficient material. It is hoped most of my work will be published in 1975. These results include observations from sea and shore, beach derelicts and museum specimens.

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(Editors comment: No further correspondence on this issue will be accepted.)