

## ROYAL ALBATROSS AT NEWLAND'S HEAD, S.A.

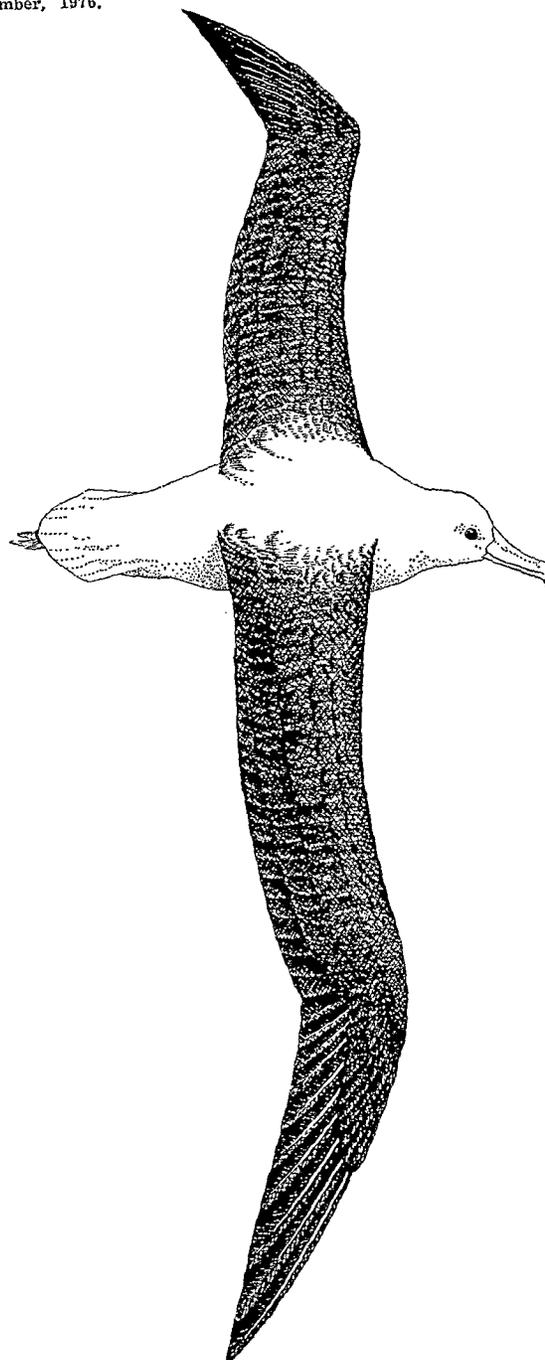
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On the morning of 7 August 1976 J. Davies, L. Edington, H. King and myself were watching seabirds from Newland's Head, Waitpinga, South Australia, when at 1035 hrs we saw a Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora* flying east to west close inshore at an estimated distance from us of 200 metres. During that morning we had also observed up to 38 Black-browed *D. melanophrys*, six Shy *D. cauta* and four Yellow-nosed *D. chlororhynchos* Albatrosses along with other seabirds, all of which similarly passed in the same direction inshore. The weather was fine with sunshine from behind us and some scattered cloud, and the previously strong south-westerly wind was moderating from the south. The Royal Albatross was seen to fly through a party of Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* and slowly around the headland. A description was written and a rough sketch was made of the bird (on which the illustration is based) immediately after it had disappeared, their accuracy being agreed upon by all observers.

Description: General appearance—a very large white albatross with wholly dark upperwings and a contrasting white back. Head, body and tail wholly white. Underwing white with neat black tips and thin rear border. Upperwings wholly dark brown. Scapular region mottled and finely freckled black and white. Large wholly pink bill with an obvious dark line running between both mandibles.

In the field Royal Albatrosses can only be confused with white adult Wandering Albatrosses *D. exulans*. The description of our bird matches that of the Northern Royal Albatross *D. e. sanfordi* (cf Slater 1970, Harper and Kinsky 1974) which Serventy *et al* (1971: 64) said can "be recognised (and at some considerable distance) by the combination of dark upperwings with white head, body and tail whereas Wandering Albatrosses with dark upperwings always have considerable brownish marks on heads and bodies and dark tips to their tails." Royal Albatrosses are also distinguishable by their having black cutting edges to the upper mandible, which in the Wanderer are white (Tickell 1970). Through 10x binoculars I saw that there was an obvious dark line along the bill between the mandibles on our bird, which I had not noticed on the many Wanderers I had previously seen. The closed bill of the Wanderer presents no obvious demarcation line between the mandibles (cf. photographs: Serventy *et al* (1971: figs. 29 and 30), Recovery Round-up (1966)).



## DISCUSSION

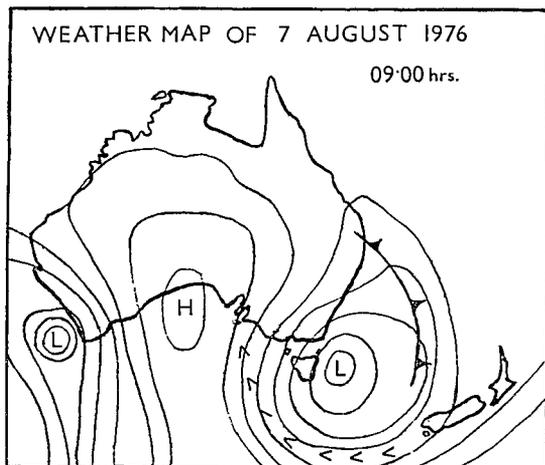
There are not many published records of the Royal Albatross in Australia (Gibson and Sefton (1962), Rogers (1970), Recovery

Round-up (1966 and 1972), Lane (1972) and Robertson and Kinsky (1972)), but M. J. Carter (pers. comm.) is preparing for publication other recent records, and he has informed me that more Royal Albatrosses had been seen in south-east Australia in 1976 than in previous years.

Condon (1975: 14) said that only nominate *epomophora* reaches Australia. Harper and Kinsky (1974) showed that juveniles of both subspecies can have wholly dark upperwings, but these may also have some black feathering on the lower back. I believe our bird was probably of *sanfordi* because of its wholly white back, and Rogers (1970) reported seeing a similar bird off NSW. More recently J. L. McKean (pers. comm.) identified another, by its white back with all-dark upperwings, and a black line just visible along the mandibular edge, just offshore from Green Cape, NSW, on 19 June 1976.

The majority of Procellariiformes which occur in South Australian waters come from more westerly breeding grounds, owing to the prevalence of westerly winds, except when there are unusually persistent easterly winds (Cox 1976: 70). Royal Albatross breeding grounds are known only in the New Zealand region: *sanfordi* on the Chatham Islands and Tairaroa Head, Otago Peninsula, NZ, and *epomophora* on Campbell and the Auckland Islands (Richdale 1939). Both races disperse to the coasts of South America (Murphy 1936, Tickell 1970), the type of *sanfordi* being collected by R. H. Beck off the coast of Chile (Murphy 1936: 584). Very few records exist of the species from

the seas between the eastern South Atlantic Ocean and Australia's south-east coast. It therefore seems that our sighting of a bird in SA and the WA record were abnormal; but the former at least may be related to seasonally abnormal climatic events. Serventy *et al* (1971: 65) said the latter could have been of a bird which had circumnavigated the globe via South America, and this might well have been the case, for Royal Albatrosses occur off both the west and east coasts of that continent (Murphy 1936), which indicates that some travel around Cape Horn from New Zealand. Our bird could have travelled similarly from the west, but I believe this to be unlikely. The illustrated map shows the weather pattern over southern Australasia one and a half hours before our sighting of the Royal Albatross. The depression centred east of Tasmania had previously been almost stabilised for some days. The combination of this and the unusual southward penetration of the belt of high pressure had created a continuous airflow around the south-western edge of the depression direct from New Zealand to South Australian seas. Normally in the winter depressions are connected to each other by a belt of westerly winds south of more northerly high pressure systems. It seems reasonable to assume that the albatross thus travelled more directly from NZ seas (as indicated on the map) with the wind, and that the reason why more NZ albatrosses have not been reported from South Australian seas is that the illustrated climatic pattern is unusual. The bird we saw may not of course have come from a breeding colony, because Royal Albatrosses breed biennially (Tickell 1970b), and at any time birds of most age groups would be at sea.



WIND PATTERN SHOWING POSSIBLE ROUTE OF ROYAL ALBATROSS FROM SEAS OF SOUTHERN NEW ZEALAND

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