

SIGHTINGS FROM LAND OF THE SOOTY ALBATROSS

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Three *Phoebetria* albatrosses have recently been seen from Newland Head, 13 km S-W of Victor Harbor, S.A. Two were sighted on 23 May by a small party and myself, and a third was seen on 30 June by Leith Eddington and David Close.

The first bird, on 23 May, was sighted at 13.50 hours, and viewed for about ten minutes at a minimum distance of 300 m, flying into a 15-knot W-S-W wind. It landed briefly on the water, showing very large pale feet.

Description: A small lightly built albatross with narrow wings flexed slightly at the carpal joint. Mantle light grey-brown, shading into chocolate head, lower back, belly and tail. Wings with apparently grey-brown coverts, slightly darker than mantle, with dark-brown primaries and secondaries. Bill black, with no observable pale sulcus.

The second bird was sighted an hour later by my companions as it rounded the head, flying into the wind, within the breaker line and about 50 m distant.

Description: An all-dark, small albatross of uniform sooty-brown colour, with narrow wings and wedge-shaped tail. Primaries and retrices white-shafted. Bill black, with a clearly distinguishable yellow sulcus. No eye-ring was observed, but this could have been missed.

Both birds were flying in typical albatross fashion, though somewhat faster than the *Diomedea* albatrosses present, which included Shy Albatross *D. cauta*, Yellow-nosed *D. chlororhynchos* and Black-browed *D. melanophrys*.

The bird of 30 June was watched for two minutes from 11.15, flying south-westward to a minimum distance of about 150 m. from the observers. The bird flew low and erratically, once briefly alighting on the water, and twice banking so as to show its left underwing and its breast to the observers, who were looking southward and slightly downward onto it in sunlight using 12 x 50 binoculars. The wind was southerly and strong, probably over 20 knots. The following description is derived from notes and a sketch made at the time.

Description: At once distinguishable from Giant Petrels *Macronectes* sp. and *Diomedea* albatrosses (both seen shortly beforehand) by slimmer shape, and more casual and skilful flight. Entirely dark except for pale ashy-grey patch on upper mantle, quite sharply demarcated from dark head, but shading gradually into back. Rump dark, almost as dark as upper tail and head. Breast dark. Bill uniformly black. No pale eye-rim, or pale markings on bill, or pale shafts to retrices and primaries were seen; these would have been noticeable if present.

The second and third of these sightings can be definitely, and the first probably, attributed to the Sooty Albatross *Phoebetria fusca*. The second is identifiable as an adult by its yellow sulcus and white shafts to primaries and retrices, the third as an immature by its lack of these features and also lack of pale eye-rim. The first was immature for the same reasons, either *P. fusca* or the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross *P. palpebrata*. Both species have been infrequently recorded in S.A., e.g. as derelicts on Goolwa Beach (Robinson, 1971). The birds described here are probably the first live *Phoebetria* seen from land in S.A., apart from the presumably ailing bird found on a beach at Port Gawler (Cox, 1976). *Phoebetria* albatrosses seem to occur in small numbers beyond the continental shelf, but rarely within it in the south-central and Kangaroo Island region (Swanson, 1973). The birds described above had probably been drifted inshore by south-westerly and southerly gales, which on both dates were moderating at the time of the sightings. South-westerly gales occurred before both dates, and in the second case had lasted throughout the previous two days.

REFERENCES

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