

NOTES ON THE WILSON STORM-PETREL

by JOHN ECKERT

The Wilson Storm-Petrel, *Oceanites oceanicus*, has only rarely been recorded from South Australia, usually by beachwashed bodies being found after storms. The rather intriguing inference by Wood-Jones (S. Aust. Orn. Vol. 14, p. 40) that probably this species was commonly seen from ships, presumably during his travels amongst our coastal islands, is the only indication that living birds might be seen in local waters.

Therefore, in the mid-afternoon of June 2, 1968, it was surprising to observe a storm-petrel skimming over the waters of Encounter Bay, only a few yards from the roadway leading to the Bluff jetty. The weather was cold and overcast with a strong westerly wind blowing but the bay itself was comparatively sheltered. In colour the bird resembled a Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus*, but was bulkier with less pointed wings. The crescentic white rump and unforked tail suggested it was a Wilson Storm-Petrel.

While watched it made another feeding beat close to the rocky shore, at times coming to within 6 feet of the actual roadway, then, possibly disturbed by my presence, it moved out to sea some 200 yards where it beat back and forth over a small area for several minutes before moving, by a rather circuitous route, well out towards Wright Island where it proceeded to patrol another potential feeding-ground.

The flight when moving from one feeding-ground to another was almost wader-like, rapid and low to the water with strong, steady wing-beats and a slight rolling motion of the body. However, when feeding, the bird skimmed just above the water with little flicking wing-beats alternated with spells of gliding. The forepart of the body was held slightly higher than the rear, the legs trailing behind at an angle of about 35° to the horizontal.

The feet trailed just above the water and during gliding spells forward motion was given impetus by pushing the water with both feet together. At no time was a walking motion used, both feet always striking the water simultaneously. The push was not vigorous and was repeated several times during some glides. Feeding was always

undertaken while moving into the wind, a more powerful flight being used to return to the starting point at the completion of a feeding beat. At times the bird would pick daintily from the surface, but occasionally would dash itself at the water a few feet to either side in a manner similar to the way in which Honeyeaters strike the water when drinking from a pool. The bird did not submerge during these sorties but lifted quickly from the water to resume its feeding flight. It was still feeding near Wright Island when I left after some 30 minutes observation.

After commenting on the bird's presence in the local paper, I was informed by Constable L. Yeo, of Milang, that he had seen several of these birds at Smoky Bay while holidaying there in late May. I visited Smoky Bay in February, 1969, and several of the residents substantiated Constable Yeo's remarks, adding that the birds had stayed for some weeks in the bay often feeding quite close to the jetty.