

Bird Note

Records of large numbers of Hutton's Shearwater, *Puffinus huttoni*, and Fluttering Shearwater, *Puffinus gavia*, off the SE of South Australia

COLIN ROGERS

Hutton's Shearwater, *Puffinus huttoni*, and Fluttering Shearwater, *Puffinus gavia*, breed in New Zealand between August and February at different locations. *P. huttoni* breeds 3-4 km inland high in the seaward Kaikoura Range, South Island, while *P. gavia* breeds colonially on islands off North Island.

In winter, *P. huttoni* and *P. gavia* are absent from New Zealand waters and present in Australian waters but in different locations. *P. huttoni* winter along the east coast north to Queensland and off the west coast of Australia as far north as the

Kimberley coast, with few records off Darwin. *P. gavia* winter in the waters of SE Australia and large flocks are regularly recorded off the SE coasts and in the waters of Gulf St Vincent in South Australia. In South Australian waters *P. huttoni* are usually seen only in small numbers on passage between western Australian and New Zealand waters (Marchant and Higgins, 1990).

In this note I report an unexpected sighting of several hundred, possibly up to one thousand, *P. huttoni* on 20 August 2017 off Port MacDonnell in the SE of South Australia and a less exceptional sighting of several hundred *P. gavia*, on 26 June 2011 from the same location.

Sightings

During a winter pelagic trip conducted from Port MacDonnell on 20 August 2017, we were informed by tuna fisherman trawling in 50 m of water that the sea was covered with "acres of birds". On arrival at this site their description was correct; the sea was covered by many large flocks, comprising 50 -100 birds, of sitting and wheeling shearwaters, which, based on previous records, were initially assumed to be Fluttering Shearwater, *P. gavia*. On closer inspection



Figure 1. Part of a large group of *Puffinus huttoni* feeding over 50m water off Port MacDonnell, 20 August 2017.
Image Colin Rogers



Figure 2. Part of a flock of *P. huttoni* taking off on 20 August 2017

Image Colin Rogers

and examination of photographs of the flocks revealed almost all were *P. huttoni*.

An example of the general scene is given in Figure 1 which shows shearwaters feeding above common dolphins.

The identification of most of the shearwaters as *P. huttoni* was apparent on close approach and is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Several years earlier on 26 June 2011 large numbers of Fluttering Shearwater, *P. gavia*, were



Figure 3. *P. huttoni* off Port MacDonnell, 20 August 2017

Image Colin Rogers

seen in the same area, also drawn to the location by the appearance of bait fish, and Figure 4 illustrates part of a larger flock recorded.

The identification as *P. gavia* is based on the features illustrated in Figure 5 showing a cleaner underwing, a less distinct hood and relatively shorter bill.

Discussion

In South Australia, and unlike *P. huttoni*, large flocks of *P. gavia* have been regularly recorded along the SE coast and in Gulf St Vincent between April and September so it was unexceptional to encounter a large flock on 26 June 2011.

Traditionally, seabirds are encountered at the area of the sightings reported here because a shallow bank attracts bait fish. Bait fish in turn attract dolphins and tuna, in season, as was the case on 26 June 2011 and 20 August 2017. However, on all previous trips from Port MacDonnell *P. huttoni* had been seen in the area only in small numbers, twos and threes and occasionally as many as five or six, but never in such large numbers as encountered on 20 August.

The appearance of such large numbers on 20 August suggests that these are adult birds on their way back to New Zealand after



Figure 4. *P. gavia* off Port MacDonnell on 26 June 2011

Image Colin Rogers

overwintering in western Australian waters. Inspection of the photographs, Figures 2 and 3, reveal that most birds are very uniform in appearance with fresh brown upperparts. Marchant and Higgins (1990) give the date of first return of *P. huttoni* to breeding sites in New Zealand as 27 August, just a few days flight from the seas off Port MacDonnell. Interestingly a report of a large flock of at least 1500 *P. huttoni* was made from Mistral Point, Maroubra, Sydney, NSW on 28 August to Eremaea Birdlines suggesting that these birds were also returning to New Zealand.

Large flocks of *P. huttoni* have not previously been recorded in South Australian waters with only small numbers recorded on passage during spring and autumn.

Of the two records reported here the large flock of *P. huttoni* recorded on 20 August 2017 is therefore exceptional. These birds were in fresh breeding plumage and it seems safe to conclude that they were taking advantage of the food supply off Port MacDonnell before returning to their breeding colonies in New Zealand.

Conclusion

Large flocks of *P. gavia* are regularly recorded in SE Australian waters including Gulf St Vincent during winter months.



Figure 5. *P. gavia* off Port MacDonnell on 26 June 2011

Image Colin Rogers

REFERENCES

Marchant, S and Higgins, P. J. (eds.) 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 1A, Ratites to Petrels*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Eremaea Birdlines, Birdline New South Wales, <http://www.eremaea.com/BirdlineRecentSightings.aspx?Birdline=2>

Colin Rogers
 6 Flavel Avenue
 Woodforde, South Australia 5072
 colin.rogers@adelaide.edu.au