

# Immature Shy Albatrosses

It isn't too hard to figure out that these birds are all albatrosses. Beyond the impressive wings, take a look at the bills, which have the nostrils set in small tubes on the sides, distinct from nostrils set in tubes on top of the bill base, such as characterize petrels and shearwaters. A quick look in *The Sibley Guide* produces no match for any of these birds, and even *The NGS Guide*, with its more-thorough treatment of albatrosses,

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doesn't offer much help. Maybe one bird is a Shy Albatross, but ... what's going on? Where do I look for more information? Help! Well, believe it or

not, all of these quiz birds can be considered to have occurred in North American waters off the West Coast. (See p. 59 for distributional notes.) As always, it's good to start with an understanding of what we're dealing with, so let's break down the world's 24 albatross taxa by genus and see how that helps.

In North America, we're most familiar with the short-tailed albatrosses (genus *Phoebastria*), which comprise Black-footed, Laysan, Short-tailed (which is no shorter-tailed than the others), and Waved Albatrosses. On all of these species, the feet often project beyond the relatively short tails. Black-footed, Laysan, and Short-tailed are shown in North American field guides; Waved (*P. irrorata*), not shown in our guides, is mostly dark with a huge, pale-yellowish bill, unlike any of our quiz birds. The largest albatrosses are the appropriately named great albatrosses (genus *Diomedea*): seven named taxa of Royal and Wandering Albatrosses that are at home in the windy Southern Oceans. These have huge pink bills at all ages, so we can rule them out. The distinctive sooty albatrosses (genus *Phoebetria*) comprise two

all-dark species with long, graduated tails—so we can rule these out, too.

And last but not least come the mollymawks (genus *Thalassarche*), a wide-ranging group of 11 Southern Ocean taxa that show marked variation related to age and taxon (species limits are unresolved in several cases). These all have dark backs and white underwings with variable black margins, and several have grayish heads. So it looks like we're dealing with *Thalassarche*. Having established this starting point, let's take a closer look.

## Quiz Photo A

The main features to check on an unfamiliar albatross are the patterns of the bill, head, and underwing—and all of these can be seen on this bird. But before we do that, take a look at the tail: It's fairly long, such that the feet don't project beyond the tip, another clue that we're not dealing with



Quiz Photo A—Early November.

some weird Laysan. The bill is dark gray with a black tip and, perhaps, a slightly paler culmen stripe; the head is smoky gray, paler on the forehead, with a short blackish eyebrow; and the underwings are white with blackish tips and a messy

leading edge that is only slightly wider than the trailing edge. Now we come to the hard part: There still isn't a really good book on the identification of albatrosses, so you'll need to dig around in various references, surf the internet, and, in both cases, hope that photographs are correctly identified. As good a place as any to start is Peter Harrison's 1983 classic *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Checking the plates there reveals that this isn't an adult of any species (adults have bright-patterned bills), and the extensively white underwings rule out Black-browed (two taxa) and Gray-headed Albatrosses. The Yellow-nosed Albatrosses (two taxa) have slenderer bills that should not show this pattern at any age, and the head of our bird is too dark and dusky for a Yellow-nosed.

So we've narrowed the choices to two taxa of Buller's Albatross and four of Shy Albatross. Buller's Albatrosses are generally smaller than Shy Albatrosses and have thinner bills; their underwing patterns do not vary appreciably with age, and the underwings have a broad black leading edge that should be thicker and more neatly defined than that of



On this **immature (first-year) Buller's Albatross**, note the following: the underwing pattern, with a thick black leading edge; the relatively slender bill with bold black lines bordering the side plates; and the culmen stripe and lower mandible, which already look a little yellowish in contrast to the dusker bill sides—a hint of the adult pattern. Separation of the two Buller's Albatross taxa ("Northern" and "Southern") is sometimes possible with adults (Northern being darker-headed with a more-contrasting silvery-white forecrown and blacker eyebrows that create a "fiercer" face), but no criteria are known for immatures. *Off Valparaíso, Chile; 4 November 2003. © Steve N. G. Howell.*

our quiz bird (see supplemental photograph, below). Another feature I've noticed on immature Buller's is that the bill tends to be slightly paler and a more fleshy gray than on some Shy Albatrosses, with a more contrasting black edge framing the nostrils (supplemental photograph, above). A field mark noted by most field guides for Shy Albatross is the so-called "thumb-print" (a blob-like expan-

sion of the black leading edge to the underwing where it meets the body); but immatures (such as the quiz bird) do not necessarily show this mark. As always, reliance on a single field mark should be avoided and we're left with an immature Shy Albatross—nice, and a really great bird to see in North American waters.

But wait, I'm afraid it's not that simple—even though the AOU 1998 *Check-list* doesn't even make passing mention of the taxonomic quagmire that is the Shy Albatross (*Thalasarche cauta*) complex. In fact, there are four described taxa of "Shy Albatross", all breeding on islands off southeastern Australia and southern New Zealand. And several authors recognize these as comprising from two to four species (see discussion in Brooke 2004): the smaller Salvin's (*T. [c.] salvini*) and Chatham (*T. [c.] eremita*) Albatrosses, which have dusky-gray heads and hindnecks as adults, and the larger Tasmanian (*T. [c.] cauta*) and White-capped (*T. [c.] steadi*) Albatrosses, which have smoky-gray faces with white hindnecks and white crowns. Within these four taxa, adult Tasmanian and White-capped may not be separable at sea, whereas adult Salvin's and Chatham are distinctive. But we've already established that our quiz bird is an immature, so is there anything we can do to refine the identification?

A prerequisite to studying plumage sequences is some knowledge of breeding cycles. The breeding chronologies of the Shy Albatross complex are not well-known, but at least three of the four taxa fledge young in March (see Marchant and Higgins 1990). Even less is known about the molt and plumage sequences of immatures, but my observations of Salvin's and Chatham Albatrosses off Chile in October–November suggest that between about 6 and 18 months of age there is a gradual molt that involves at least the feathers of the head, neck, back (including scapulars), and tail (a molt sequence similar to that deduced for Black-browed Albatross; Prince and Rodwell 1994). There is no molt of the primaries in this period, and the 18-month-old outer primaries are often noticeably frayed at their tips. The bill has a large and solid black tip during this period, but it sometimes develops a small pale tip by 18 months of age, when indications of the adult bill pattern and color can start to show. The main identification problems therefore lie with birds 1–2 years of age—and our quiz bird's solidly black bill tip suggests it fits in this category.

Let's take a closer look at the features we should check. The bill color is difficult to describe, but it's a kind-of dark brownish-gray with a slightly paler culmen stripe and band at the base of the lower mandible. The head is smoky gray with a paler forecrown, and it looks to be newly molted

relative to the browner sides of the neck. (In many birds—not just albatrosses—fresh gray feathers often bleach to brown.) The underwing shows a messy black leading edge and an overall dark underside to the primaries, which contrasts strongly with the white of the primary coverts. Young Tasmanian/White-capped Albatrosses can fledge with grayish hoods, but much of the head soon bleaches or molts to whitish, leaving a ragged dusky hindneck collar (reminiscent of immature Black-browed Albatross). The bill of a Tasmanian/White-capped that has started head and body molt is usually paler, with a more contrasting black tip; the bases of the outer primaries are typically whitish, not contrastingly dusker than the primary coverts; and the black leading edge to the underwing is rarely if ever this thick. So I think we can rule out either a Tasmanian or White-capped Albatross. Our bird is therefore of the Salvin's/Chatham type.

The plumages, molts, and bill color changes of immature Chatham and Salvin's Albatrosses appear to be undescribed, but my observations off Chile (where both occur in numbers as non-breeding visitors; Spear et al. 2003) suggest that many birds are separable. The quiz photo is typical of a **first-year Salvin's**, which characteristically has a dark grayish bill with a large black tip, and sometimes a variably paler culmen stripe (visible at close range) that mirrors the adult pattern. The supplemental photograph below shows the same or a similar bird from



On this **immature (first-year) Salvin's Albatross**, note the following: the uniformly worn and slightly brownish juvenal upperwings (no contrastingly new primaries, and no strong contrast in wear between feathers); the fresher and grayer postjuvenal head; and a few fresher gray postjuvenal feathers coming in on the back. Relative to Buller's Albatross (cf. photograph, p. 57), the bill is darker and somewhat stouter, without contrasting black outlines to the plates. *Off Valparaiso, Chile; 4 November 2003. © Steve N. G. Howell.*

above. I took these photographs off Valparaíso, Chile, on 4 November 2003.

## Quiz Photo B

Having worked through the solution to Quiz Photo A, we can quickly deduce that this bird is an immature of the Shy Albatross complex. Isn't it amazing how "easy" identifica-



Quiz Photo B—early November.

tion becomes once we've done a little background work? But this bird looks rather different, so is it another Salvin's or one of the other taxa? Perhaps the most eye-catching feature is this bird's yellowish bill. And the head, back, and tail look fairly fresh, especially in contrast to the ratty upperwings. Look at how frayed the tips of the outer primaries are. The bill still has an extensive black tip, which, together with the molt sequence, suggests that this bird is in its second year of life, and thus a year older than the bird in Quiz Photo A. Tasmanian and White-capped Albatrosses of any age do not have a bill this color, and by the second year these taxa should have a more adult-like head and neck pattern—not this extensive, smoky-gray hood.

So we're back to Salvin's or Chatham. Exceptionally, some adult Salvin's have bills that approach, but don't quite match, this brightness (based on thousands I've seen at and away from the breeding grounds). But this immature, which I photographed off Valparaíso, Chile, on 4 November 2003, has the bright yellowish bill diagnostic of an **adult or older immature Chatham Albatross**; immatures often have a paler forecrown, unlike the solidly slaty blue-gray hood of adults. Salvin's at this age has a dark grayish bill similar to that in Quiz Photo A. For the record, some first-year Chathams may

also be distinguishable by bill color. A few first-year birds I've seen off Chile had dingy pale fleshy-yellowish bills (see supplemental photograph, below), quite different from the



On this **immature (first-year) presumed Chatham Albatross**, note the dull but fairly pale, fleshy-yellowish bill color; the contrast between the worn brownish juvenal hindneck and the grayer postjuvinal head feathers; and the underwing pattern. *Off Valparaíso, Chile; 20 October 2001.* © Steve N. G. Howell.

hundreds of typical Salvin's Albatrosses there (cf. Quiz Photo A). I presume these are Chatham Albatrosses, and, although confirmation is desirable from birds of known provenance, I offer it here as a starting point.

## Quiz Photo C

Yes, another immature "Shy Albatross"—easy, isn't it? But this one looks different again, although that large, solid black bill tip indicates it's likely to be a bird 1–2 years old. Differences in this bird relative to the other two quiz photos are the mostly white head with a messy gray hindneck "shawl", along with a paler gray bill that contrasts strongly with the blackish tip. Looking more closely at the underwing, we can see white "fingers" on the primary bases, so there isn't contrast with the primary coverts; also, the black leading edge looks cleaner and narrower (but this might be due in part to the angle). As we discussed under the solution for Quiz Photo A, these are all features of immature Tasmanian/White-capped Albatrosses, and they rule out the Salvin's/Chatham pair. However, distinguishing between immature Tasmanian and White-capped apparently isn't possible; even birds in the hand can't always be identified to taxon without genetic analysis (Double et al. 2003). I photographed this **immature Tasmanian/White-capped Albatross** off Tristan da Cunha, in the subtropical South Atlantic Ocean, on 1 April 2002.



In terms of North America, the "Shy Albatross" (in the AOU sense) has been recorded several times off the Pacific

coast, and mostly in the past seven years. These records include the following: an adult White-capped Albatross collected off Washington in September 1951 (Slipp 1952; see Cole 2000); an adult Tasmanian Albatross photographed off California in August 1999 (Cole 2000); an immature



Quiz Photo C—early April.

Salvin's/Chatham photographed off California in September 2000 (*North American Birds* 55:120); and an immature photographed off California in July 2001 (*North American Birds* 55:507) with a bill color, as shown in the photographic reproduction, that suggests it could be a Chatham Albatross. And in April 2003 an adult Salvin's Albatross turned up in the albatross colony on Midway Atoll, Hawaii (*North American Birds* 57:432), while in August 2003 an immature Salvin's Albatross was photographed off the Aleutians (Benter et al. 2005). So be prepared, don't be shy about going out on pelagics, and maybe white caps aren't a bad thing!

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