

# Fea's Petrel off Scilly:

## new to Britain

*Ashley Fisher and Bob Flood*

**ABSTRACT** A Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* was seen from a boat approximately 10 km south of Scilly on 8th July 2001. Although there had been several previous sightings of Fea's/Zino's Petrels *P. feae/madeira* in British waters, this sighting constitutes the first accepted record of Fea's Petrel for Britain.

The total duration of the event lasted about 12 minutes, during which time the Fea's Petrel flew past the boat on four or five occasions at a distance of no more than 20 m. Close views enabled detailed scrutiny of many key structural and plumage features, and these field observations were supported by a high-quality video sequence. The elimination of Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis* and Zino's Petrel is discussed.

The one thing certain about pelagic trips is that you can never be certain what you will see. The 2000 pelagic season off Scilly had been particularly good, and July was by far the best month. In contrast, the 2001 season had been fairly quiet, the highlights being single Wilson's Storm-petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* on just eight dates up to 8th July, and we had become despondent. Our efforts were, however, more than compensated for on 8th July when, out of the blue and quite astonishingly, a Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* appeared at point-blank range off the starboard side of MV *Kingfisher*.

On the evening of 8th July 2001, we were drifting and chumming approximately 10 km south of Scilly at 49°48.573'N 06°11.370'E. Weather conditions were fair. The wind was a moderate (force 3) northwesterly, enough to disperse the smell of the chum and cause drift, but the sea state remained reasonably calm with a slight swell and light waves. Cloud cover was 100%, but thin and high. All in all, conditions were good for a pelagic trip. Bob Flood (RLF) was in the cabin scanning the slick on the port side and Ashley Fisher (EAF) was on deck covering the same area. Nigel Wheatley, along with three visiting birders, including Pete Massey and Mark Ponsford, was watching the starboard side. It had been another quiet evening when, cutting into the silence, we both heard Nigel's distinctive yet perplexed voice from the star-

board side asking, 'What's that?' Given the onset of apathy, this vague and restrained question barely attracted our interest. A few moments later, now flavoured with a touch of panic, Nigel exclaimed, 'What is that?!' EAF instantly pivoted through 180° and almost immediately screamed, 'It's a Fea's! It's a Fea's! It's a Fea's!' In a flash, RLF leapt out of the cabin and without hesitation agreed with EAF.

The bird had approached the bow of the boat from the east and passed the starboard side at a distance of about 10 m, continuing around the stern, roughly to the southwest. During this quick view, we established that the flight action was distinctive and, in general, appeared pratincole *Glareola*-like, buoyant with quick wingbeats and circling glides (cf. Gantlett 1995). It maintained this pattern of flight as it meandered some way off to the southwest. Nobody expected that this dream bird would turn back on itself and pass the boat again; but it did, four or five times, and each time at a distance of no more than 20 m. At each pass we were able to pay particular attention to the crucial features which separate Fea's Petrel from the closely similar Zino's Petrel *P. madeira*, including plumage detail, bill and wing structure, and the bulk of the head, neck and body.

It was immediately apparent to all observers on the MV *Kingfisher* that our bird had a stockier body and much longer wings than

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* (also seen that evening). A striking feature was its deep and heavy black bill. The head was thickset, with a dark crown and 'panda-like' smudge marking through the eye. There were smudge markings at the side of the neck, but these did not continue across the breast in a full or even partial band, so the centre of the breast remained completely white. The body was substantial, with a full breast, tapering at the rear to a blunt point at the end of the tail. The underparts (including the breast) were bright white, while the mantle was grey. The wings had both a long 'hand' and a long 'arm', the trailing edge of the primaries showed little or no convex curvature and the 'hand' was clearly pointed. A subtle 'M' was visible across the brown-grey upperwings, while the underwing showed a pattern of greys with a small extension of white onto the base of the under-forewing. Video footage was secured and video grabs illustrate many of the features described above (plates 194–198).

The experience was breathtaking, not only because of the close views, but also because the bird stayed with the boat for so long and swept past at close range on four or five occasions. It was able to glide seemingly without effort low over the sea on bowed wings and yet, in a moment, was able to carry out graceful sweeping turns and circular manoeuvres. It is not possible to describe in words the impact of such a sight on a seabird fan! The *Pterodroma* petrels are near-mythical birds, and to see a Fea's Petrel so well and within sight of home was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

### Description

#### Overall size and structure

In comparison with Manx Shearwater seen that evening: (a) body length roughly the same; (b) head and neck more thickset and body form stockier; (c) wings noticeably longer; and (d) bill a good deal heavier and deeper.

#### Structural details

Bill: large, heavy, and deep. Head and neck: large headed and bullnecked. Body: stocky and full-chested, tapering towards rear end. Tail: long and tapered, coming to a rounded blunt point. Wings: long, slim wings with pointed hand, and minimal convex curvature to the trailing edge of the primaries (apparent in every frame of the video footage).

### Plumage

At distance, the bird looked almost monochrome. Head: ostensibly hooded, comprising a dark, dirty-grey crown, darker than neck and mantle, and darker still panda-like smudgy blackish eye-patch. Mantle: grey, contrasting with paler uppertail-coverts and tail. Tail and uppertail-coverts: paler than the rest of the upperparts, appearing pale grey to almost white. Throat and underparts: white. Central breast: clear and unmarked with no more than a grey patch on the sides of the neck and upper-breast, and thus lacking a lateral breast-band. Upperwing: grey-brown (more brown than grey) with an observable but, to some observers, subtle 'M' across the outstretched wings formed by dark primaries and primary coverts, dark secondary, median and lesser coverts, and a dark band across an otherwise grey rump that connected the two 'half-Ms' on each wing. Underwing: at long-range, appeared entirely dark; at middle-range, a small extension of white onto the base of the under-forewing was apparent; and at close-range and also visible in video grabs, a complex of grey shades that formed a broad, dark bar in the region of the median underwing-coverts, and which faded at the carpal joint. This dark bar was accentuated by the conspicuous white inner forewing and a greyer central area extending to the arm and hand. Trailing edge appeared darker than the greyer central area.

### Bare parts

Bill black. Legs not visible.

### Flight action

Distinctive and that of a typical *Pterodroma*. The following describes the Fea's flight action as caught on video. At times gliding quite effortlessly, low over the sea on bowed wings, punctuated occasionally by two to six wingbeats. The bird would gain momentum with a run of faster wingbeats, and rise effortlessly up to 3–4 metres, turn and complete a full circle on a downward glide before tilting the other way and peeling off in the opposite direction.

### Call

Silent, no call heard.

### Why Fea's Petrel?

Separation of Fea's and Zino's Petrels requires the utmost care and attention to detail, com-



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Ashley Fisher



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**194–198.** Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*, at sea, 10 km south of Scilly, 8th July 2001 (video grabs). Note the large, heavy bill, grey hood and blackish eye-patch, the long and slim pointed wings, the minimal convex curvature to the trailing edge of the primaries, blackish underwings with conspicuous white inner forewings, complete lack of breast-band, and the grey mantle contrasting with paler tail and uppertail-coverts.

bined with exceptional viewing conditions, while the unlikely possibility of a Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis* is more readily addressed. Until the appearance of the Scilly bird, no Fea's/Zino's Petrels seen previously around the coasts of Britain had been sufficiently close, or lingered for long enough, to enable the crucial features to be examined in detail. Now, we were presented with an unprecedented opportunity to clinch the identification to the species level, one way or the other. Although we had no prior experience of positively identified Fea's or Zino's Petrels, RLF

had previously seen two Fea's/Zino's Petrels from Scilly-based pelagics and Soft-plumaged Petrel at sea off Cape Town, South Africa. Subsequently, he has seen Fea's Petrel near Madeira, another positively identified Fea's Petrel off Scilly, and a further three Fea's/Zino's, also off Scilly. In addition, Pete Massey and Mark Ponsford had seen one Fea's/Zino's Petrel while sea-watching from the mainland; but for EAF, this was his first ever *Pterodroma*, although he has since seen another positively identified Fea's Petrel and two additional Fea's/Zino's Petrels from Scilly-based pelagics. Added to this, both

RLF and EAF are highly experienced pelagic seabirders, typically venturing into the seas around Scilly about 50 times each year between June and October in search of seabirds, in most sea states from balmy doldrum conditions up to force 6 or 7. Consequently, we are extremely familiar with all the likely species that we could encounter, in a range of weather and sea conditions. Consequently, we were fully aware of all the features that we needed to concentrate on in the event of such an encounter.

Given the outstanding views and supporting video footage of this bird, we knew that the possibility existed that this bird could be positively identified. Excluding Soft-plumaged Petrel was fairly straightforward at the time of observation, owing to the lack of breast-band and whitish tail among other things, but eliminating the closely similar Zino's Petrel required careful attention to detail and critical observation of key features. After 12 minutes of outstanding terrific views, combined with photographic support, we were confident that we had also eliminated Zino's Petrel.

#### *Elimination of Soft-plumaged Petrel*

Soft-plumaged invariably has a complete, or near-complete, lateral breast-band (of 250 seen in the southern oceans in March 2006, RLF noted just one with a near-complete lateral breast-band, the remainder being complete), whereas our bird showed a clear and unmarked breast with no more than a grey patch on either side of the neck and upper breast. Our bird also had a dark, dirty-grey crown, darker than the neck and mantle, whereas a Soft-plumaged Petrel would show a 'clean' grey crown, similar in tone to neck and mantle. In addition, the tail of the Scilly bird was paler than the rest of the upperparts, appearing somewhere from pale grey to almost white, whereas the tail of Soft-plumaged is clean grey and similar in tone to the mantle. Crucially, the bill structure of our bird was large, heavy and deep, whereas the bill structure of most Soft-plumaged Petrels is intermediate between that of Fea's and the much slimmer bill of Zino's Petrels (see Ian Lewington's illustrations in Harrop 2004). We were extremely confident that Soft-plumaged Petrel had been eliminated using this combination of features.

#### *Elimination of Zino's Petrel*

Given that the plumages of Fea's and Zino's

Petrels are, to all intents and purposes, identical, their separation relies on a combination of size and structural differences, with Fea's being the larger and heavier of the two species.

In terms of body size and structure, in comparison with Manx Shearwater our bird was about the same length, but stockier, which favours Fea's Petrel. Furthermore, the body was stocky and full-chested, tapering towards the rear end; the bird was large-headed and thick-necked, features which again point towards Fea's, and which are supported by the video sequences. In comparison, Zino's Petrel is said to be decidedly smaller than Manx Shearwater in body size, with a fairly slender and near flat-chested structure, thus tapering to a long narrow rear end, and with the head and neck described as dove-like, not hefty, and more like that of a 'Cookilaria' petrel (Brinkley 2004). Therefore, the body size and structure are strongly indicative of Fea's Petrel, and given that it is, on average, approximately 50% heavier than Zino's, this difference must be evident in the field.

Bill structure is undoubtedly the single most crucial feature which can clinch the identification. The bill of our bird was large, heavy and deep; a feature noted at the time of observation and again supported in the video sequences. In comparison, the bill of Zino's is described as shallow, even thin, in profile. Reports from observers who have been fortunate to observe Zino's Petrels at sea confirm that the light bill structure gives Zino's a very distinctive appearance and makes it look quite different from Fea's (Brinkley 2004; also see photograph in Fisher 1989).

Wing shape provides further supporting evidence towards a positive identification in favour of Fea's Petrel. In all still images taken from the video footage, and thus when seen in many different positions, the wing shape of our bird is long and slim, with pointed 'hands' and minimal convex curvature to the trailing edge of the primaries. In general, the wing of Fea's Petrel appears long and slim because P10 is longer than P9 (primaries numbered descendantly, P10 being the outermost). In contrast, the wing structure of Zino's Petrel appears shorter and blunter because P10 is the same length as, or slightly shorter than, P9. This issue is important, as this it explains the difference between the 'pointed Fea's vs. blunter Zino's wing-tip theory' (Gantlett 1995; Tove 2001).

FEA'S PETREL  
c. 7 MILES S OF SCILLY  
8<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2001  
E. A. FISHER

(1850-1902).

Wings long slim + (sharply) pointed. Underwing largely blackish with obvious white wedges at base of forewing.

Underparts clean white. (No suggestion of breast-band).

Body appeared rather chunky + thickset. 'Full-breasted' / Pot-bellied. (- augmented by larger head).

At certain angles, secondaries appeared darker than greater-coverts forming narrow trailing edge.

At close range (300r) 'M' pattern (covert-bar) was -

difficult to detect.

Primaries + Primary coverts blackish.

Ear-coverts black, crown slightly paler but with brownish tinge.



Bill large, deep + heavy. Seen clearly at 300r + larger in all proportions than expected! (Bulbous looking).

Similar in size to Manx Shearwater, but noticeably stockier with longer wings + tail, larger, broader head + (significantly) heavier bill.

"Tail long - tapering towards pointed tip. Rump, uppertail-coverts + tail pale grey. Noticeably paler than (+ contrasting with) remainder of uppertails.

Very Pratincole-like in slight - not just due to slight action but mainly to the contrast between black underwings + white body.

Prominent pale crescent at base of greater primary coverts.

Appeared hooded (vaguely recalling Cory's Shearwater). Nape + sides of neck (darkish) grey. Crown + ear-blackish.

Underwing pattern seen to be very complex at close range. (All black when distant).

Often appeared 'capped' - narrow broken line extended to nostril.



Mantle + Scapulars dark (ish) grey. Lower rear scapulars blackish.

- Head large + broad. Vaguely recalling Fulmar.

Upperwing greyish-brown (more brown than grey) with variably prominent (depending on range + angle of view) blackish 'M' pattern.

At range, appeared monochrome (ie black + white).

Narrowish black 'line' across median coverts.

'Forewing wedges' often lost against background accentuating rufous appearance of wings.

'Arm + hand' evenly proportioned.

'Wing-tip' sharply pointed - never looked blunt or rounded! Little or no convex curvature to trailing edge of 'hand'.



As viewing distance increased, so did the relative prominence of the 'M' pattern across the upperwings.

Ashley Fisher.

Fig. 1. Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*, at sea, 10 km south of Scilly, 8th July 2001.



Ben Lascelles

**199.** Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*, at sea, 17 km west of Scilly, 6th September 2004. Note the notch between the tip of the nostrils and the back of the hook at the tip of the upper mandible; this important feature for the elimination of Zino's Petrel *P. madeira* was visible only from photographs.

Including the July 2001 bird described above, we are fortunate to have observed a total of seven six *Pterodroma* petrels during pelagic trips off Scilly. Although viewing conditions varied, all appeared identical in shape and structure, and there is no evidence to suggest that any of these seven six *Pterodroma* petrels are anything other than Fea's Petrel. One individual seen particularly well from MV *Sapphire* on 6th September 2004, approximately 17 km west of Scilly, for about ten minutes at close range, has also been accepted as a definite Fea's Petrel (Flood & Lascelles 2004; Rogers *et al.* 2005). On this individual, we were able to see an additional important feature that supported the identification as Fea's Petrel (from photographs, although not visible in the field; plate 199). The bill had a notch-like shape between the tip of the nostrils (naricorn) and the rear of the hook at the tip of the upper mandible (maxillary unguis). In comparison, this area of the bill in Zino's is wedge-like in shape (Harrop 2004).

#### References

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, commented: 'The assessment of this record perhaps demonstrated the different roles of BBRC and BOURC, and how interaction between the committees can improve the function of both. Most BBRC members had assessed over a dozen records of *Pterodroma* petrels and had a good understanding of what was required of a record for it to prove conclusive at the species level and the point at which they would be prepared to accept the balance of probability. They were comfortable that, given the bird's plumage, the general appearance of a bulky petrel with a heavy bill could be consistent only with Fea's and ruled out the possibility of Zino's. The fact that no individual freeze-frame on the video clinched the shape of the bill was not seen as a major problem, especially as the observers had provided a detailed sketch of the bill shape, and members were all satisfied with the identification.

'BOURC members examined the record from the slightly different perspective of whether the evidence conclusively proved the occurrence of the species so that it could be placed on the official British List. They were able to compare this record with the bird photographed from the MV *Scillonian* one month later, on which the bill shape could be seen. Large amounts of time were spent examining individual frames on the video and none conclusively showed the bill shape. After considerable discussion, both committees came to the conclusion that the overall impression of the bird was compatible only with Fea's. This record helpfully demonstrates, as mentioned in the 'From the Rarities Committee Files' (*Brit. Birds* 95: 156–165), how boat-based observation has much greater potential for securing difficult vagrant seabird records than land-based observation, owing to duration of observation, proximity to birds and greater photographic opportunities.'

Bob McGowan, Chairman of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, has commented: 'As mentioned by Jimmy Steele (pp. 000–000) and by Andrew Harrop in his review of the 'soft-plumaged petrel' complex (*Brit. Birds* 97: 6–15), birders have been excited yet perplexed by *Pterodroma* petrels in the North Atlantic for over 20 years.

'Given the paucity of records and the challenges in obtaining good views and/or photographs, it was not surprising that development of reliable identification criteria involved a lengthy gestation period. Perhaps a contributory factor is a complete lack of specimen records (historical or recent) that would have otherwise given some tangible identification clues to the taxa involved. Furthermore, the increase in frequency in records during the 1990s appears to represent a recent, genuine status change in British (and North American) waters.

'The Fea's Petrel seen in July 2001 afforded the observers a perfect opportunity to clinch identification to species level, as the bird made a handful of close flights past the boat over a period of 12 minutes. Detailed notes supported by video clips formed the basis of Ashley Fisher and Bob Flood's submission.

'There was considerable support for the record within BOURC, though a few members expressed concern that the visible bill details could not effectively rule out Zino's Petrel. For example, as the smallest Fea's bill length measured by Zino & Zino (1986) was only 1 mm longer than the largest Zino's bill (26 mm), it was considered that resolution of such a difference in the field presented a significant identification challenge. Relative measurement of the bill from video stills proved impossible owing to image pixellation. The aspect of bill size and shape was discussed exhaustively by members. During the circulation, however, it became clear that an overall impression of bulkiness to the bill was of greater value than precise dimensions, and Fea's Petrel on the whole appeared more robust than Zino's Petrel. It was agreed that this aspect of the description did indicate such a distinctive, bulky bill; in conjunction with the other details, this clearly pointed to Fea's Petrel, so permitting its acceptance to Category A of the British List.'