

A first for Australia: Polynesian Storm-petrel

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Plates 1 & 2 Pale morph Polynesian Storm-petrel *Nesofregatta fuliginosa* over Norfolk Ridge, Western Pacific Australian waters, April 2008 (Mike Danzenbaker). The first for Australia. This polymorphic storm-petrel is widely distributed across the tropical Pacific, but is poorly known. Its life history is unknown and there is minimal knowledge about its breeding biology and diet. The world population is thought to be no more than 10,000 pairs and Birdlife International is concerned that the species may be in decline, with local extinction at a number of known breeding localities.

During the Western Pacific Odyssey 2008, en route from Norfolk Island to New Caledonia on 7th April, I located a Polynesian Storm-petrel *Nesofregatta fuliginosa* from the stern of MV Professor Khromov. The locality was over Norfolk Ridge at approximately 26.24°S, 167.12°E. There was a force 4-5 wind and the sea was choppy with a two-metre swell. The bird passed port side of the stern approximately 80 metres off, drifting towards the wake, but was soon lost to sight. A handful of birders witnessed this sighting.

I radioed out the news and very quickly all other birders on board gathered on or above the stern. We were dripping cod liver oil. Evidently, when the bird crossed our wake, it caught a whiff of the odour and it headed back towards our stern. After several minutes, a shout came from an upper-deck that the storm-petrel was heading back. It advanced to about 80 metres and showed for about six minutes, enabling reasonable photographs and video to be secured and excellent views for all. A few Grey-faced Petrels *Pterodroma gouldi* and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters *Puffinus pacificus* also were present at the time.

The relatively huge size of this storm-petrel was self-evident as it effortlessly glided back and forward across the wake. Its flight jizz was reminiscent of a Wood Swallow *Artamus*. It foraged by rising over crests and swooping into troughs, where it was seen to collect oil droplets.

The storm-petrel hardly ever flapped its wings, but gently twisted them and its tail in effortless turning manoeuvres. The head looked relatively small on a thick neck and against a stocky body. The bill was relatively long and slim. The caudal projection was long, comprising the rump and a long forked tail, and the toes projected well beyond the tail-tip. The wings were long and broad, with the hand especially long and somewhat attenuated with fairly blunt tips. The wings were held outstretched, with the leading edge moderately angular and the trailing edge mildly angular. This was a pale morph individual, dark grey-brown overall with a white throat, breast, belly, narrow rump band, and broad white secondary underwing-covert panels becoming dusky on the primary underwing-coverts, making the underwing of the hand overall dark. The dark of the breast-band extended onto the underwing to form a broad dark leading edge to the arm, mirroring a thick dark trailing edge formed by the dark secondaries. The undertail-coverts were dark. Narrow, indistinct upperwing secondary greater covert bars were visible at close range. The remiges and rectrices were blackish-brown and visibly worn, with notches and abrasion evident in photographs.

This was the first ever Polynesian Storm-petrel to be recorded within Australian waters.

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Bob Flood, *Isles of Scilly*.

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