

Black-capped Petrel off Agadir, Morocco, in March 2013

Andrew Williams works as a marine environmental consultant, specializing in seabird, cetacean and fisheries monitoring programmes. In March 2013, he was undertaking marine survey work west of Agadir, Morocco. A storm tracked east across the North Atlantic with wind speeds of 9-10 Bft (severe gale/storm force) and swell with heights of 9+ m (high to very high). The ship sheltered for two days then returned to the survey area c 30 km due west of Agadir. On 23 March, the wind was 4 Bft south-south-west and the swell c 5-6 m. Visibility was good, although impaired by intense sunlight and surface glare. AW was logging seabirds when at c 14:10 he momentarily saw an unfamiliar bird 700-750 m away as it appeared above the swell and then vanished into a trough. Shortly after, it re-appeared c 350 m abeam of the ship on the margins of the sun and surface glare and was on view for c 15 s. The bird sheared to its right, headed slightly away, glided down the face of the swell, into the trough and out of sight. A single 'record

shot' was hastily taken (plate 111) as the bird flew toward the surface glare where it was finally lost to view.

Description and identification

At first sight, AW noted a dark cap, white nape, brown mantle and upperwings, and white in the 'rump'. Initial thoughts were Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*. However, on second view, AW noted a very heavy dark bill, eye-catching white nape, and extensive white 'rump patch'. A brief glimpse of the underwings suggested a white mid-wing panel with dark leading and trailing edges. The bird was mainly gliding though made several strong, stiff and shallow wing beats. AW gained the impression of a powerful bird, with a large head, front-heavy body, and tapering rear end. He realized that it was probably a *Pterodroma* petrel. AW reviewed the single photograph alongside the literature (Flood & Fisher 2013) and suspected that it was a Black-capped Petrel *P. hasitata*. He was hesitant because of his lack of experience with the species and its very rare status in the north-eastern Atlantic. So, he sent the photograph to Robert Flood

TABLE 1 Records of Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* in the Western Palearctic; BF = black-faced, WF = white-faced, I = intermediate (Newton 1852, Howell 2002, Haas 2012, 2017, Flood & Fisher 2013; Daniel López-Velasco in litt 2018, Dutch Birding 40: 113, 117, plate 147, 2018; this paper)

<i>Azores</i> (3) 26 May 2007, at sea, 16 km south-east of Graciosa, WF 22 May 2009, at sea, 9-11 km south of Pico, WF/I 7 September 2011, at sea, c 16 km west of Faial, WF	13 February 2018, Santo Antão, captured, BF
<i>Britain</i> (2) March/April 1850, Southacre, Swaffham, Norfolk, England, found exhausted, then collected 16 December 1984, Barmston, East Yorkshire, England, juvenile female, found dead	<i>Madeira</i> (1) 8 May 2010, at sea, c 425 km north-east of Madeira (35°50'N, 14°46'W), WF/I
<i>Cape Verde Islands</i> (3) 6 February 2016, Santo Antão, captured, WF 11 March 2017, at sea, El Barril headland, São Nicolau, WF/I	<i>Morocco</i> (1) 23 March 2013, at sea, c 30 km west of Agadir, WF/I
	<i>Spain</i> (1) 30 April 2002, at sea, c 320 km north-west of Cabo Finisterre (45°01'N, 12°16'W), WF

for an opinion, and RF confirmed it as a Black-capped.

Identification of a seabird from a 'record shot' – in this case a small image in sun glare – requires careful thought and analysis. White parts of a bird can be exaggerated by adjacent 'white spots' in the sea surface glare, and structure such as robustness of the bill can be exaggerated by adjacent 'dark spots' in the sea surface glare. In plate 111, the white nape may be exaggerated by a white spot but the robust bill and extensive wedge-shaped white 'rump patch' are genuine. This is a robust bird with a deep bill, typically dipped downward, large head, thick neck, heavy body, and mid-length tail tapering to a (blunt) point. The cap is black, although the expected white forehead presumably is lost to a

111 Black-capped Petrel / Zwartkapstormvogel *Pterodroma hasitata*, c 30 km west of Agadir, Morocco, 23 March 2013 (Andrew C Williams). Compare with plate 112.



photographic aberration. The upperwings and upper body are dark greyish-brown, while other visible areas are white. The extent of the cap cannot be determined exactly but probably is in the range b-c-d as shown in the range of head and neck patterns in Flood & Fisher (2013); in other words, a white-faced/intermediate morph.

Black-capped Petrel is a large robust *Pterodroma* petrel with a wingspan between that of Great Shearwater and Sooty Shearwater *P. griseus*. White-faced types on average are the largest of three morphs of Black-capped. Black-capped shares the classic *Pterodroma* flight behaviour, fast and aerodynamic, wheeling and arcing in the wind. Key plumage features are a contrasting dark cap, dark greyish-brown upperside, and white uppertail-coverts forming a large wedge-shaped white 'rump patch'. The underwings played a small part in the identification of the Agadir bird. However, they are characterized by a striking dark and white pattern, being largely white with a dark leading edge to the arm, a dark trailing edge, and a dark ulnar bar extending to the axillaries (thickest on dark morphs). Great Shearwater is superficially like Black-capped but has a less squarish head, a more slender bill, a slimmer body, and a much less extensive white 'rump patch'. Compare the similarity of the Agadir Black-capped (plate 111) to the Black-capped off Hatteras, USA (plate 112). Also compare the Great Shearwater (plate 113) with the two Black-capped (plate 111-112).

In glaring light, when details of the plumage aspect are lost, Bermuda Petrel *P. cahow* is separated from Black-capped Petrel by its smaller size, less robust build (smaller bill, slimmer body, longer attenuated tail), and narrow white 'rump band'. Similarly, Fea's Petrel *P. feae* and Desertas Petrel



112 Black-capped Petrel / Zwartkapstormvogel *Pterodroma hasitata*, off Hatteras, USA, 21 May 2008
(Chris Sloan)

113 Great Shearwater / Grote Pijlstormvogel *Puffinus gravis*, Malpica, A Coruña, Spain, 29 August 2011
(Juan Sagardía)



P. deserta are smaller, less bulky (though male Desertas is heavily built), and have narrower longer-looking wings. Zino's Petrel *P. madeira* is even smaller and slimmer.

Taxonomy

Black-capped Petrel is currently treated as a monotypic species. The white-faced and black-faced morphs differ in morphology, timing of records at sea, and genetics. They may represent two taxa, possibly subspecies (Howell & Pattenon 2008, Flood & Fisher 2013, Manly et al 2013; cf Dutch Birding 30: 260, 2008).

Distribution and movements

Black-capped Petrel is classed as 'endangered' by IUCN and the population estimate currently is 5000 mature individuals (Flood & Fisher 2013). The species breeds on Hispaniola, Dominican Republic, and possibly in south-eastern Cuba. In November 2011, more than 30 territories were discovered in south-easternmost Haiti and, in 2015, 968 were found breeding on Dominica (Dutch Birding 34: 178, 2012, 37: 342, 2015). It formerly bred commonly on Guadeloupe, where it is now believed to be extinct, and may have nested on Martinique. It disperses over tropical and subtropical waters of the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean, ranging from north-eastern Brazil to north-eastern USA (Flood & Fisher 2013). It has been recorded as far north as Nova Scotia, Canada, with a number of inland records following hurricanes (eg, in 10 USA states; Brinkley & Pattenon 1998, Flood & Fisher 2013, Carboneras et al 2017). The species' range within the Caribbean Sea is poorly known. Three birds breeding on Hispaniola were satellite tracked: maximum ranges during the breeding season were from 500 to 1500 km; northward dispersal during the post-breeding period involved maximum distances of 2000-2200 km (Jodice et al 2015).

WP records

The record off Agadir has been submitted to the Moroccan rarities committee; if accepted, it becomes the first for Morocco and Africa. Black-capped Petrel is an extremely rare petrel in the north-eastern Atlantic, with just 11 (10 live) indi-

viduals recorded in the Western Palearctic region (table 1). Nine of them occurred in February-May, one in September, with one found long dead in December. Two different individuals were trapped on Santo Antão, Cape Verde Islands, in February. All birds except one have been of the white-faced or intermediate morph (Flood & Fisher 2013; table 1). In addition, one observed for four hours c 96 km south-west of Rockall, Scotland, on 26 February 1980 (Dannenberg 1983) was considered not proven by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). Also, a bird reportedly collected in Pas-de-Calais, France, in the 19th century, was not accepted because the specimen is missing (Haas 2012).

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Robert L Flood, FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, South Africa;
14 Ennor Close, Old Town, St Mary's, TR21 0NL Isles of Scilly, UK
(live2seabird@gmail.com)

Andrew C Williams, 28 Kanachrine Place, Ullapool, IV26 2TX Ross-shire, UK
(pelagicbirder@gmail.com)