

BARC SUBMISSION

Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross at Cape Naturaliste

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Summary

This submission relates to the sighting yellow-nosed albatross seen (and photographed) during a land-based seawatch from Cape Naturaliste in far south-western Western Australia during the passage of a strong cold front. Based on the extensive grey collar and prominent dark eyepatch, we consider this to be an Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*).



SUBMISSION

Species: Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*)

Location: Cape Naturaliste, near Dunsborough, Western Australia
GPS co-ordinates: -33.530°S, 115.005°E (approximate)

Date: 22nd April 2018

Circumstances of sighting: A cold front had affected the south-west the previous day, and a second was approaching the cape, with gale force NNW'ly winds forecast overnight, swinging NW'ly then W'ly on the day of observation. Such conditions are conducive to good passage of seabirds past Cape Naturaliste, typically approaching from the north-east or east (i.e. out of Geographe Bay) and travelling past the cape and out to the west or south-west. This was the case on the day of observation, with large numbers of seabirds passing – the bulk of these comprised Flesh-footed (c. 2,000) and Hutton's Shearwaters (c. 3,000), but 10 tubenose species were recorded. Albatross diversity was low, but Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses passed the cape regularly throughout the watch. Overhead conditions varied from sunny to predominantly overcast, with occasional light showers.

Conditions at the time of the sighting were patchily cloudy, with light cloud over the sun dulling the light somewhat; however, the cloud over the sun was thin enough that the ocean to the NW was still dazzling with reflected light. At around 10.30am, SF called a distant possible young Black-browed Albatross approaching from the north-east (Geographe Bay), based on an apparent grey collar. However, the bird was lost for several minutes in the dazzling reflected sunlight to the north-west. It was subsequently picked up again much closer to shore as it moved out of the reflected light, and immediately called by DM as an unusual yellow-nosed albatross. All four of us were able to locate the bird quite quickly, and obtained good views for over a minute through spotting scopes as the bird passed very close to shore (just beyond the breakers) before continuing out to sea to the south-west. DM and MC were also able to obtain a series of distant photographs of the bird.

Physical description

The bird was readily identifiable as a *Thalassarche* albatross (aka. mollymawk), with a proportionally slender body, neck and bill for that group – typical of the two yellow-nosed albatrosses. There was no noticeable difference in structure compared to the Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses seen on the day. The body was predominantly white, with solid dark grey-black

upperwings, back and tail. Underwings were mostly white with blackish primaries, a relatively neat and narrow black leading edge and narrower black trailing edge. Bill black with the suggestion of a pale stripe running along the culminicorn, though this could not be determined with certainty. The most notable features – which drew our attention almost immediately – were:

- an extensive grey collar, extending up the hindneck, clearly onto the sides of the neck, and perhaps faintly around towards the foreneck, and;
- an extensive dark eyepatch – the precise shape was not easily discernible at range, but at least one observer was confident of a more triangular shape. All four observers agree that eyepatch was considerably more extensive than observed on any other yellow-nosed albatross on the day.

DM and MC were both able to obtain a series of images as the bird passed close to shore, and we include a selection here. We believe these images provide support to our field observations; however we would like to emphasise that these images are supporting material only and scope views were significantly better than the images obtained.

Elimination of confusion species

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross: The primary confusion species that needs to be considered is Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross (IYNA) *T. carteri*, as it is typically the most commonly observed albatross off the west coast of Australia and is the closest in overall appearance to Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross (AYNA), with which it has often been considered conspecific. Separation of the two taxa is dependent on age, and rests largely on a combination of the presence and extent of grey on the face and neck, the shape and extent of any dark eyepatch, and detail in the shape of the proximal end of the culminicorn and the pale culminicorn stripe (Flood 2015; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). Details of the culminicorn were not assessable in this instance, so separation rests largely on the extent of the grey on the head and neck, and the extent of the dark eyepatch. However, we consider that the extent of the grey collar and dark eyepatch are both beyond what would be expected in IYNA, both according to the literature and in our own extensive experience with the species off Western Australia.

Importantly, we also consider that the two features in combination are diagnostic of AYNA. In particular, juvenile IYNA are known to show pale grey hindnecks, sometimes extending to an indistinct narrow collar (Shirihai 2007; Flood 2015), which become whiter with each successive moult, such that older immature and adult IYNA do not show any suggestion of a grey collar. Adult IYNA may show a noticeable grey eyepatch – though still significantly less extensive than in typical

adult AYNA, this may approach younger AYNA in extent. However, young IYNA only show a very small, rounded grey eyepatch (Onley & Scofield 2007; Flood 2015), imparting a distinct “beady-eyed” look (Flood 2015). Hence, whilst a young IYNA might exceptionally show a grey collar approaching this bird, it would not show an extensive dark eyepatch as in this bird. Similarly, whilst an adult IYNA might exceptionally show a dark eyepatch approaching this bird, it would not show the extensive grey collar shown by this bird. By contrast, we consider this plumage to be an excellent fit for a 2cy or 3cy immature AYNA.

Though not in any way diagnostic, it is also worth noting that a second AYNA seen two weeks later off Albany gave an identical initial impression to this bird, with a grey collar and extensive dark eyepatch.

Other small albatrosses: Other *Thalassarche* albatross were also considered, but the combination of small size, slender build, predominantly black and proportionally slender bill, and the width of the dark underwing margins should be sufficient to rule out all contenders.

Previous occurrence: There had been three prior records of Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross off Western Australia at the time of this sighting:

1. Perth Canyon: 20th July 1997 (not submitted to BARC as at the time was not recognised as a full species, but convincing images exist)
2. Perth Canyon: 21st August 2016 (BARC accepted)
3. Albany: immature seen off Albany on the 13th May 2013 (not accepted by BARC)

As noted above, another sighting was made two weeks after this sighting on a pelagic trip off Albany on the south coast of WA, and has also been submitted to BARC for assessment.

There have also been four records from eastern Australia accepted by BARC.

Previous observer experience with Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross

DM has previously seen the species in Western Australia, and both DM and SF have previously seen this species off southern Africa. All four observers have extensive seabirding experience in Western Australia, both from boats and land-based seawatching, including extensive experience with Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross, which is the most common albatross overall in south-west Australian waters.

References

Flood, R. 2015. The yellow-nosed albatrosses: molt, age and identification. *Birding* 47 (3), pp. 31-41.

Menkhorst, P., Rogers, D., Clarke, R., Davies, J., Marsack, P. & Franklin, K. 2017. *The Australian Bird Guide*. CSIRO Publishing.

Onley, D. & Scofield, P. 2007. *Albatrosses, Petrels & Shearwaters of the World*. Princeton University Press.

Shirihai, H. 2007. *A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* 2nd Edition. Princeton University Press.

Figures

NOTE: Photos are attached separately to allow submission of “higher” resolution photos.

The photographers (Dan Mantle and Martin Cake) consent to BARC displaying any/all of the images below electronically (fully credited by name).

List of attached photos

Figure 1: Dorsal view 1. Photo Dan Mantle

Figure 2: Dorsal view 2. Photo Dan Mantle

Figure 3: Ventral view 1. Photo Dan Mantle

Figure 4: Dorsal view 3. Photo Dan Mantle

Figure 5: Dorsal view 4. Photo Dan Mantle

Figure 6: Dorsal view 5. Photo Martin Cake

Figure 7: Dorsal view 6. Photo Martin Cake

Figure 8: Composite of images. Photos Martin Cake and Dan Mantle

Figure 9: Composite of AYNA images with comparison images of IYNA taken on same day. Photos Martin Cake and Dan Mantle