

BARC SUBMISSION

Barau's Petrel at Cape Naturaliste (near Dunsborough, SW Western Australia)

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Summary

This submission relates the sighting of a medium to large *Pterodroma* petrel while seawatching during strong south-westerly winds at Cape Naturaliste near Dunsborough, in far south-western Western Australia. A *Pterodroma* petrel showing a combination of relatively large size, and plumage of dark upperparts and white underparts at this location suggests Barau's Petrel, and after careful consideration of potential vagrant confusion species, we are very confident in this identification. At the time of submission, this would represent the 8th record of the species for Australia (if accepted), though we note at least two additional reports supported by photographs that are yet to be submitted.

SUBMISSION

Species: Barau's Petrel (*Pterodroma barau*)

Location: Cape Naturaliste, near Dunsborough, Western Australia

GPS co-ordinates: -33.530°S, 115.005°E (approximate)

Date: 1st November, 2019

Circumstances of sightings: The passage of a strong cold front produced excellent seawatching conditions at Cape Naturaliste on 30th October and 1st November. Such conditions are relatively rare after September in the south-west, as the cold fronts move further south over summer. A long seawatch by JG on the 30th October produced a reasonable variety of tubenose species, the highlight a single Grey Petrel. Strong SSW'ly winds pushed up offshore overnight, giving us hopes of some more southerly seabirds ahead of another watch by SF and JG on the 1st November. Winds during the watch were WSW/SW'ly at around 25 knots. Good passage of Flesh-footed Shearwaters was again present, but the southerly influence was evident in the much lower numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters compared to the previous day, and sightings of colder water species such as Sooty and Grey-headed Albatrosses. The primary passage of birds was appearing distantly to the north or north-east of the cape, then tracking closer to shore to round the cape, as is typical in strong WSW and SW'ly winds.

At approximately 0840, SF called a pale-bellied bird distantly to the north, initially assumed to be a Hutton's Shearwater (the only pale-bellied tubenose seen regularly across the two days aside from albatrosses). However, it quickly became apparent that this bird was something different, being longer-winged and larger than a Hutton's in comparison to the nearby Flesh-footed Shearwaters, and showing predominantly white underparts, lacking the dark hood and dark markings on the underwing characteristic of Hutton's. As the bird moved closer and into better viewing light, SF also noted a dark M across the upperwings. Shortly afterwards, JG also got onto the bird, and both observers felt it was likely a Barau's Petrel. Both observers were able to follow it for two minutes or so as it passed the cape and then tracked away to the west. At its closest point, the bird was approximately 600m from our observation point, affording good scope views. Viewing conditions at the time of the sighting were mostly sunny.

Physical description

Medium-large *Pterodroma* petrel with contrasting dark upperparts and predominantly white underparts.

Size: Medium-large for a *Pterodroma*. Larger than Hutton's Shearwater, but smaller than Flesh-footed Shearwaters in direct comparison. Both observers noted that it was considerably larger (in comparison to the shearwaters) than Soft-plumaged Petrel, which are regularly seen from Cape Naturaliste.

Underparts: Underparts predominantly white, with dark tail, and dark margins to majority of underwings, extending as a dark carpal bar on the leading edge of the inner wing. Carpal bar was prominent, of approximately equal thickness to the dark leading edge to the outerwing, and appeared to extend half to two-thirds of the way down the length of the innerwing. The pale leading edge to the underwing forward of the dark carpal bar was surprisingly inconspicuous (cf. field guide illustrations), particularly in more distant views, giving the impression instead of a dark leading edge to a narrow innerwing – a relatively distant photo of a previous record by Steve Reynolds available on the Seabirds and Pelagics Facebook group gives some indication of this impression (Appendix 1 – NOTE NOT A PHOTO OF THE SUBJECT BIRD). Undertail was blackish, but no indications of dark undertail coverts were noted, contra Onley & Scofield (2007). However, this feature appears to be erroneous, as it is not illustrated or described in Menkhorst *et al.* (2017), and is absent in the majority of images of Barau's Petrel available online.

Head: Dark cap reaching just below the level of the eye, with white lores. Paler grey extending down from nape, but not extending further down the sides of the neck than the level of the dark cap (this is contra images of some individuals available online, but consistent with others).

Upperparts: Upperparts grey, with dark cap contrasting with paler grey nape and mantle and inner forewings. Dark "M" shape across upperwings extending onto, and concolorous with, dark grey rump and uppertail. White lores visible in closer views, bill short and dark but no detail visible.

Shape: Shape broadly similar to Great-winged Petrel, suggestion of a marginally narrower and more tapered rear body, and perhaps somewhat narrower-necked and smaller-headed, but

not seen in direct comparison. In direct comparison to Flesh-footed Shearwaters, wings proportionally longer and narrower, smaller-bodied and smaller-headed, with narrower and more tapered rear end.

Flight style: Almost entirely gliding, relatively slow, easy, wheeling – more relaxed compared to smaller Soft-plumaged Petrel, with wings held straighter than Great-winged Petrel (i.e. not held forward as the carpal as much).

Elimination of confusion species

Soft-plumaged Petrel (*Pterodroma mollis*): Although not the closest alternative candidate on plumage, Soft-plumaged Petrel is the most regularly recorded petrel with a white belly on the west coast of WA. However, it is easily ruled out in this instance by a number of features, including the predominantly white underwings (cf. mostly dark grey in Soft-plumaged Petrel) and relatively larger size of this bird (larger in comparison to Flesh-footed Shearwater than Soft-plumaged Petrel).

White-headed Petrel (*Pterodroma lessonii*): Probably the next most regular white-bellied petrel off WA, but readily excluded by the predominantly white underwings (cf. blackish in White-headed Petrel), dark cap (cf. white or pale grey cap), and dark rump and uppertail (cf. pale grey-white rump and uppertail).

Juan Fernandez Petrel (*Pterodroma externa*): A vagrant to Australian waters and not yet recorded offshore from Western Australia (or indeed, anywhere in the Indian Ocean to our knowledge), but is similar in appearance and size to the candidate bird. However, Juan Fernandez Petrel show a very limited dark carpal bar (usually no more than a small dark “tick” mark at the carpals), lacking the prominent dark carpal bar extending well onto the inner wing seen on this bird. Our bird also showed no evidence of a pale crescent on the rump that is typically shown by Juan Fernandez Petrel.

White-necked Petrel (*Pterodroma cervicalis*): Similar in size and shape to Barau’s Petrel, with plumage superficially quite similar, and first recorded in Western Australian waters in early 2019. However it is readily ruled out by the lack of a prominent white hind neck collar.

Vanuatu Petrel (*Pterodroma occulta*): Vagrant to Australian waters and not yet known from Western Australian waters (or to our knowledge the Indian Ocean generally), but closer in size to Barau's than White-necked. However, it is also ruled out by the lack of a white collar.

'Cookilarias' - Cook's/Black-winged/Mottled/Gould's etc. Petrel: Relatively large size (estimated through direct comparison with Flesh-footed Shearwaters) and relaxed flight style rules out the Cookilaria group as a whole, which are slightly smaller again than Soft-plumaged Petrel, with more acrobatic flight. Most can also be ruled out by various plumage features (e.g. lacking grey belly of Mottled, presence of dark cap cf. Cook's).

Hawaiian and Galapagos Petrels (*Pterodroma sandwichensis* and *P. phaeopygia*): Neither species is known from Australian waters, and both are highly unlikely to occur based on range, but possibly the most similar species in overall plumage to Barau's Petrel. We consider that these can largely be excluded on range. However, Hawaiian Petrel also shows a proportionally long and tapered rear end, distinctly longer and more pointed than observed on this bird. Galapagos Petrel tends to show dark markings at the base of the underwings, which were not evident on our bird. Galapagos Petrel also tends to show more uniformly dark upperwings, lacking the prominent dark "M" visible on our bird. We feel the combination of these minor features, and the high degree of improbability in occurrence is sufficient to exclude these two species.

Previous occurrence: Barau's Petrel has been recorded on five previous occasions off south-western Australia, all in January and February. It should be noted though that most records have been from Orca charters running to the Bremer Canyon, which only begin in late January, so survey effort from January onwards far exceeds that from October to December. Previous south-western Australian records are:

- 17/02/2015 – Single bird at the Bremer Canyon (BARC Case #966 – Accepted)
- 14/01/2016 – Two birds at sea off Cape Leeuwin (BARC Case #1046 – Accepted)
- 04/02/2017 – Single bird at the Bremer Canyon (BARC Case #967 – Accepted)
- 15/01/2018 – Single bird at the Bremer Canyon (BARC Case #989 – Accepted)
- 26/02/2019 – Single bird at the Bremer Canyon (Not yet submitted, but photographed)

There have been a further four records accepted by BARC (or otherwise well-documented) elsewhere in Australia that we are aware of:

- 15/02/1987 – off Western Victoria (BARC Case #115 – Accepted)
- 09/02/2013 – off Sydney (BARC Case #785 – Accepted)
- March 2017 – West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (BARC Case #981 – Accepted)
- Nov-Dec 2017 – West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (well-photographed, likely same bird observed earlier in the year)

The prevalence of records in recent years with increased observer effort in the summer months off south-western Australia suggests this species is likely to be a regular visitor in small numbers, rather than a true vagrant.

Previous observer experience with Barau’s Petrel

Neither observer has previous field experience with Barau’s Petrel. However, both observers have extensive experience with seabirds off south-western Australia, including numerous pelagic trips, and a combined total of over 40 seawatches from Cape Naturaliste and the adjacent Bunker Bay area. Additionally, both observers are familiar with the identification features of Barau’s Petrel, being keenly aware of the possibility of observing the species in south-western Australian waters.

Other observers

SF and JG were the only observers present.

References

Howell S. N. G & Zufelt K. (2019). *Oceanic Birds of the World*. Princeton University Press.

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 and Shearwaters of the World*. Princeton University Press.

Numerous online images also referred to.

Acknowledgements

We’d like to thank Steve Reynolds for the use of his photo to assist in this submission.

Appendix 1:



Barau's Petrel photographed mid-distant off Bremer Bay by Steve Reynolds in early 2019, illustrating the loss of visibility of the white leading edge to the inner underwing in more distant views. Note, not an image of the candidate bird.