

BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee

Unusual Record Report Form

This form is intended to aid observers in the preparation of a submission to document a major rare bird in Australia. Its use is NOT mandatory. Please attach and/or include all relevant information including any digital images. Please Email the completed form/submission to the BARC Chair, Tony Palliser tonyp@bigpond.net.au

BARC considers submissions that include a minimum of the submitter's name(s), the bird species claimed and the location and date(s) of the record. However, more information and evidence will usually be required for BARC to accept a record. So, please submit as much detailed information about the bird as possible.

If you choose not to use this form please make sure all relevant information requested in this form is included in your submission. However, it is our preference that you fully complete sections "A" and "B", or follow their headings, so that BARC has some continuity between all submissions.

Section A: Submitter details	
Your name(s) Joint submissions are fine	George Vaughan.
Your email, phone or address	

Section B: Record details	
Common and scientific names Include subspecies if relevant	Tristan Albatross (<i>Diomedea (exulans) dabbenena</i>).
Site location (with GPS if possible)	Bremer Canyon, Bremer Bay, Western Australia.
Date(s) and time(s) of record (First and last date of occurrence if known)	Third of February, 2019. The actual time of day eludes me, but it was probably sometime between midday and one o'clock, I would think.
How many individuals were there?	One.
What was the distance to the bird(s)?	This varied a lot; it hung around on the horizon for a very long time, but then quickly came in extremely close when the Killer Whales absolutely obliterated that poor (most probably Cuvier's) Beaked Whale.
Habitat description	The open ocean over the mighty gash of the Bremer Canyon, at a depth of between 200 and 1500 metres.
Sighting conditions (e.g. weather, visibility, light conditions)	The weather was fine, the breeze stiff, and the lighting bright and clear; it was good enough conditions that the blows of the wonderful Sperm Whale pod could be seen at two miles, to put it into context.
How confident are you in the identification (as a %) and why?	<p>Hmmm... I would say I'm a good eighty-to-ninety percent confident on the ID, closer to the latter than the former. The reasoning goes thus: the single silver band on the right leg is very much a South African convention, as seen in the Amsterdam Albatross, apart from some occasional throwbacks in the New Zealand system. This also holds true for the Wandering Wanderers under South African jurisdiction, such as the bird I saw on an Eaglehawk Neck pelagic which was confirmed as being from Marion Island. As for the famous Albatross of Amsterdam, one was seen with an identical band configuration and at the very same place as my bird! It's always the same; silver band, right leg. The Wanderer tends to be on the left leg, compared to the Amsterdam, another damning point against this bird as being of that race.</p> <p>Other than that, the bird we examine today is very much like a Gibson's in general form, with the short bill and large eyes of that</p>

particular creature, which by themselves is enough out both other realistic South African contenders. Thus, we must rule out the Gibson's. To this end, there is the matter of the clear white belly patch and brown, scalloped necklace on our bird; this is a far more of a Tristan feature than a Gibson's feature from what I can gather, albeit about as "far more Tristan" as one can get in such a hard-to-call situation as this! Apparently, the Gibson's tends to have a more diffuse brown all over the belly, while the Wandering is of totally different physical form. The bill of the bird we're examining also struck me as being just a bit off, even as I watched it; it eventually dawned on me how pale and washed out it was compared to any Gibson's I've ever seen, and how the tip was noticeably greener and darker. This isn't an exact science, but looking through as many photos as I could of the two revealed it to be a surprisingly consistent difference. It's also something I've noticed in my years of trying to find a diagnostic difference for the Tristan, which was a hobby for me long before I ever dreamed of seeing one! I suppose if anyone would notice a subtle difference between two such similar birds that most busy researchers would probably chalk up to being "too hard to bother", the devoted amateur like myself seems the most likely person to find something new, unshackled by the constraints of orthodox methods and conventional thought.

As for ruling out an Antipodean Albatross, things get perhaps a little foggier here, as I haven't had the same experience with them as with Wandering or Gibson's. The plumage of the Antipodean and the Tristan is remarkably similar across all ages, in some ways more similar than between the Tristan and the Gibson's, but I feel pretty confident in ruling the Antipodean out based on a difference that I've noticed in my years of researching Tristan Albatrosses, searching for some kind of "tell" in the field. From looking at as many photos as I could find, I found what appears to be a consistent difference between the Tristan and the Antipodean; at the age of our bird here, the Antipodean seems to much more often than not have a noticeable white collar behind the neck, very bright and clear between the vermiculations of the back and the cap on the head. The Tristan, on the other hand, has no such thing, and neither did our bird. I also notice that the Antipodean tends to have a much finer patterning of vermiculations on the back, while the Tristan has splotchier brown patches. This again isn't exactly a diagnostic, but it's something I've actually spent several years looking into, trying to find a diagnostic feature for the Tristan Albatross. In addition to this, similar to what we've discussed with the Gibson's, the Antipodean tends to have a brighter pink bill overall than either the Tristan or the bird in question. Lastly, based on the available data I can find, the standard banding of the Antipodean is done with a single matte-white band with none of the metallic glint or ring-indent of the South African bands... or the band on our bird!

On an unrelated note to the different species debate, the fact that the Tristan has been tracked to these exact waters several times is intriguing unto itself. Why would a bird of this configuration appear this far West, where the Tristan is known to appear at times, and not be that bird, rather than a banded Gibson's or Antipodean in a place where no banded Gibson's or Antipodean has ever been recovered, as far as I can gather?

Some of the Facebook discussions in the Seabirds and Pelagics group were a little chatty about the thickness of my bird's cap for a Tristan; however, scanning through all the eBird photos of the Tristan, all taken at its eponymous islands, I was able to find a couple of birds every bit as solidly capped as the beautiful bird in question (for example, see this list here: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S60075494>).

	<p>Basically, to sum up, I urge you to ask yourselves, why would a Gibson's type bird with a white belly and dark necklace, wearing what is almost certainly a South African band, appear this far west, in waters known to be haunted by the Tristan on occasion? While Nature does break her own rules of distribution on occasion, indeed rather frequently, this does all seem exceptionally damning in ruling out a funny anachronistically banded Gibson's or Antipodean. This near-perfect concoction of factors leaves me pretty convinced that I have every right to claim this beautiful creature as a Tristan through an official, authoritative committee such as your good selves, though we can all agree, I'm sure, that no birder, expert and novice alike, is "without right" to call whatever they please, whenever they please, and receive appropriate respect from those on both sides of the debate.</p>
<p>Did you find and/or identify the bird initially? Who else recorded the bird and do they agree with the identification?</p>	<p>I did see it first, and did indeed call it as the Albatross of Tristan, having been saying ever since booking this trip that any Gibson's type bird would have to be checked for South African bands, albeit only about three quarters seriously. Thus I was definitely on the lookout, and... I can't believe I'm saying this now; it actually paid off!!</p>
<p>What experience have you had with this species?</p>	<p>While I haven't had any experience with the Tristan (until now, that is), I have plenty of experience with the various alternatives. Especially relevant to this case, I had front row seating for a fine show from a juvenile Wandering at Eaglehawk Neck; this bird was carrying an identical South African band configuration to our bird, and following it up proved this fellow to have been banded on Marion Island. I can tell you now that this particular Wandering was, in almost all regards of shape and form, a very different beast from the creature in question today!</p>
<p>Has this species been seen at this location before? When?</p>	<p>I have read that the Tristan has been tracked, apparently more than once, to waters this far east of its island home, as can be read about in the Australian Bird Guide, which several of your committee helped to write.</p> <p>I'm also sure that Hadoram Shirihai would have something to say about it too in his Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife; this is a book I have read right through many times.</p>
<p>Have photographs of the bird or discussion of it occurred on the internet? (Please provide the site name, a summary, electronic link, etc.)</p>	<p>Here's the link for my eBird list, which has commentary on the circumstances of the event in question far more detailed than the scope of this particular submission:</p> <p>https://ebird.org/checklist/S64082550</p> <p>Furthermore, there is a lengthy discussion of the bird on the Australian Seabirds and Pelagics group on Facebook, with a number of both measured, intriguing and ever so slightly pompous arguments being made both for and against; considering several committee members are a part that group (indeed, taking part in these very discussions), and I haven't yet gone down the Facebook rabbit-hole, I'll respectfully leave it up to you to find the link, if that's ok.</p>
<p>Do you permit BARC to display your images etc. electronically (credited with your name)</p>	<p>Indeed I do; I have nothing to hide!</p>

You may choose to delete or ignore this page, but please include as much of the requested information in your submission as possible, especially Sections C and E.

Section C: Supporting evidence

Please include evidence that supports the identification, such as photographs, video, call recordings, etc. Digital images can be pasted into this document below, at the end, or provided separately. Digital video and sound recordings can be sent separately to this form. Label photos etc or insert captions to make note of relevant features they show.









Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): Let's open with the best enhanced shots of the band itself; I don't want to blow it up too much because the loss of definition wouldn't help anyone! You can actually tell this band is from the same production line as that of the Bremer Canyon Amsterdam from a while back, a bird I will remind the committee that it accepted without a problem as being from South African jurisdiction... and that nothing here is different, not even the three distinct grooves in the middle, one above the other. I see no reason not to believe it's from the same batch bought to ring Amsterdams.



Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): note the short billed, large eyed appearance of the bird, which recalls Gibson's, and the slightly paler, more washed out colour of the bill than in any of the many Gibson's I've seen, contrasting a little more with the tip (though this is hardly diagnostic, I'll be the first to admit).



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Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): now here's where things get interesting, possibly even conclusive! The band is clearly a single, silver band bearing three ring-indentations around the middle; this is very much more often used by the South African banding agency on birds such as the Marion Islands Wandering and the Amsterdam! Also note, the band is of identical make to those used on the Amsterdams.



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Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): I urge you to take note of the clear white belly, evidence of Wandering type sideburns, and very distinctive dark necklace, which will be even more apparent, and elaborated on, in the next couple of photos...



Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): these are the best shots I bagged of the birds' underside; I urge you to take note of the clear white belly, and very distinctive dark necklace. In these photos especially, the slightly more washed out, darker-tipped bill becomes more than apparent, though again I admit this isn't exactly a diagnostic feature, merely a difference I noticed out in the field. What is more diagnostic is the short bill and large eye; these rule out the identically banded Marion Island Wandering. What's more, there is evidence of a more Wandering looking sideburn on a more Gibson's type bird; the Australian Bird Guide, as contributed to by several of your committee, notes that the variation of Tristan's plumage spans both Wandering and Gibson's.



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Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): in these shots, the Gibson's-like head dimensions, clear white belly, dark necklace, and evidence of Wandering-style sideburns are more than apparent.



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Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): here is another sequence of the shots I'm particularly happy with! It's a very nice illustration of those all-important head dimensions such as the bill length and the eye size, combined with an artistic blend of stillness and movement between bird and background I'm sure even the naysayers will admit is pleasing on the eye! Again, though, note that slightly different bill colour; it was like a polaroid of an Amsterdam faded with time, albeit without the cutting-edge.



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Tristan Albatross (third of February 2020): while this slightly softer-focused shot isn't any more or less useful than some of the other shots, let's appreciate the Killer Whale in the background for a moment! I suppose the sideburns on the bird are again quite evident here, but yes! I thought some closing levity would be welcome after these high-minded discussions of science!

A few further photos can be found at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S64082550>.

Section D: Description of the bird(s)

Please provide a description of the bird(s) including all identification features recorded.
Provide all possible details that might corroborate the identification.

Plumage

This bird had the beautiful brown-and-white checkerboard plumage characteristic of all in the Wandering complex when they're in their immature years. I won't pretend to know enough about aging in Albatrosses to take a stab at any particular age for this one; Gulls are more my

	<p>field, in that regard! As discussed above, this fellow is perfectly consistent with a Tristan, inasmuch as it is a bird with the form of a Gibson's bearing a clear white belly, dark necklace and Wandering-like sideburns. The cap, as discussed above, is quite solid for what one might expect of a Tristan, but it's definitely not outside their spectrum. I also wish to raise your collective attentions to the fact that the colouring of this bird is very consistent with how the Tristan tends to reach adulthood with a noticeable retained cap, while the vermiculations are faded; in all the Gibson's I've seen, it tends to go the other way round, with vermiculations remaining quite prominent while the cap is absent, though who knows if these are differences in sex and age that aren't made apparent in eBirds data banks, nor shouted by the birds themselves out in the field!</p>
Bare parts	<p>While I've already been the first to admit this is definitely not an exact art yet, I could pick there was something just a little off about this bird's bill even as I watched it; it was very washed out, more whiteish than pink, and the tip was noticeably darker and more contrasty than anything I've seen on a Gibson's in the field. Indeed, looking through all the photos in eBirds databanks, I can say it seems to be a fairly consistent rule in all the examples people have reported from their respective heartlands, though I concede that the younger Gibson's can on occasion be pretty contrasty of bill too.</p> <p>As for the legs, these are all important as they bear the band which sent me into such ecstasies when I saw it! Again, I will stress, the band was identical in colour and configuration to both that of the young Wandering I saw off Eaglehawk Neck, which was proven beyond doubt to be from under South African jurisdiction, and the Amsterdam Albatross which your good selves accepted from the same location as my bird (the respected Daniel Mantle's "white band on the right leg" of that particular Amsterdam is of an identical make and model to the band on the bird we discuss today, bearing those three distinctive rings indented into its structure). Despite the risk of the occasional New Zealand banding throwbacks raised in the Facebook discussion, my research indicated that they prefer to use the white plastic band with large, blocky letters rather than a steel one with smaller writing (at least in the case of the Antipodean); thus, it's perfectly reasonable, indeed admirable, for anyone to call a bird such as mine of this banding configuration as a Tristan, especially out this far west!</p>
Moult details	<p>This is something to which I will admit total ignorance and a great deal of disinterest in, under almost all circumstances; I am an appreciator of form, character, and the intricacy of colours and contrasts in birds, the things that make them living artforms, rather than being one for studying the wear of wings and coverts on a computer after the fact. That said, I acknowledge it's an important field, just not one I care for enough to make any meaningful judgements about the bird in question today.</p>
Structure and 'jizz'	<p>This bird was of typical Gibson's build and proportion, especially around the head, as I have so often mentioned above. As for that famously ephemeral concept, the "jizz" of our bird was typical to the smaller Wandering-type birds; that is to say, it was a very stately and dramatic aeronaut, a true master of the open oceans, just in a rather compact, contained kind of way.</p>
Calls	<p>Being at sea, this bird did not call in any way that was diagnostic; indeed, it didn't call at all!</p>
Behaviours	<p>In common with the other Wanderings that were seen on this trip, both of which were definitely Gibson's, the bird in question stuck mainly to the horizon, teasing us for hours, rising and falling above the skyline as it followed the winding will of the wind. Then, the moment that poor Beaked Whale got crunched, the Killer Whales literally piling on top of it, the bird in question shot over to investigate the kill! It was immensely frustrating how cautious it was to land, circling over the slick for a good five-to-ten minutes, seeming daunted by the Shearwater hordes that chased around Shy and Sooty Albatross alike. Eventually, it decided to run the gauntlet... and so it landed, revealing the much-discussed band! It didn't sit for long, and was soon up in the air again, circling around and around, before it drifted away peacefully over the horizon, never to be seen again.</p>
Age, sex and/or taxonomy	<p>This bird is, to my mind, of the subspecies dabbenena, which is a breeding bird in the Tristan Da Cunha area of the Atlantic, and on Gough Island specifically. It's a rare race indeed, plagued by the peculiar and macabre problem of killer "Super Mice" eating them alive! It's good to know there's at least one gracing us with its presence before the end. As stated before, I'm no expert in the aging and sexing of Albatrosses; I can tell it's some kind of immature, but more than that I will leave to you to say...</p>

Section E: Confusion species

Please indicate other species that the bird(s) might be confused with and how they can be eliminated

I have discussed above, in great detail, why our bird definitely wasn't a Wandering, almost certainly not an Amsterdam, and why it seems most unlikely to be a Gibson's or Antipodean, leaving us with the fantastic revelation that another Tristan has graced us with its presence, after all these years. But anyway! Let's finish this with one last, in depth discussion of the differences...

This bird is clearly not a Wandering banded on Marion Island (that is to say, an exulans under South African jurisdiction) because of the short, thick bill and large eyes. Its form couldn't be more different, in terms of the Great Albatrosses, and more than that need not be said on the matter.

Likewise, much the same can be said of our bird versus an Amsterdam; the Amsterdam has a long bill of bubble-gum pink colour, olive green tip and black cutting edge. Besides the slightly contrasty difference between bill and bill-tip, our bird bears no real similarity to an Amsterdam, unless it's an incredibly old bird in which, maybe, the bill has started to fade? Such musings, though, are pure speculation on my part.

As for ruling out Gibson's and Antipodean, a task I admit is very difficult, I point your attention to the clear white belly and dark necklace on our bird, and the band of identical colour, configuration and even quirks of design to all Amsterdam birds as accepted by yourselves, in Australia. I know that the numbers on the band aren't legible; trust me, this is as frustrating for me as it is for you... but to put too much weight on such matters is but petty bureaucracy when compared to the wonder the acceptance of such a rarity would inspire in birders the nation over, surely a loftier goal than such tedious things as seeking an absolute truth which simply cannot be found, in these circumstances!

I wish to close by urging you to turn your collective minds towards the facts in their most basic form. I've said it before, and will gladly say it again; the Tristan is a bird which looks identical to a Gibson's or Antipodean, wears the single silver band of South Africa on the right leg, has some plumage characteristics of the Wandering of Marion Island, and has been tracked into Australian waters, specifically into the West, which is a mere stones-throw from Gough Island to an Albatross. To reject this bird based purely on its band being unreadable, a blow though that is, would be the height of hypocrisy; you, as a committee, have accepted a number of far more spurious reports, things based on far less evidence than I have put before you! Did the Pheasant-Tailed Jacana come with shots both accurate and pleasing? Did the Antarctic Petrel off New South Wales, which went just as unphotographed as the first example, wear a band that showed its provenance? If you wish to reject the Tristan I place before you, which obviously I wouldn't bemoan you for as individual people, you would then need to go and reject every single record this panel has accepted with less evidence than my own through the years; that is, of course, if you value the consistency and impartiality of your records...

Maybe, in fact quite probably, it's a case in which this committee will reach the conclusion that the bird we examine here might be a Tristan, but equally might not; that is to say, it might be fifty-fifty either way, and you may feel too afraid to accept this record based on uncertainty. But what is there to fear in taking a chance, I ask you, when the odds are equally weighed? Why fear the glass that's half full, rather than half empty? Will there be retribution from some "God of the Sciences" who loathes the rarity over the commonplace, or the wrong choice where neither right or wrong is in fact knowable? That can't be it, not to the rational mind of the scientist, at any rate! Maybe you may fear the joy felt by those people who follow your rarity reports as I do? No, that can't be the reason either; we've already ascertained that to wonder at birds, rare and common alike, is our field in its most admirable form. So yes... in the absence of a band number, and thus the absolute truth so beloved by the pure-scientists, we may never be absolutely satisfied either way. It may languish in the "fifty-fifty" basket. But, in the presence of such evidence as I've repeatedly outlined above, why choose to tread the path of obscurity when both options are as legitimately valid as each other, rather than throwing yourselves headfirst into the realm of the exceptionally rare, a realm we can all surely agree is very beautiful?

I'm sure someone amongst your august ranks will call me out on this, saying that one ought to be "conservative" in regard to the sciences, and err on the side of caution. But why? Why, when the glass is both half-full and half-empty, deliberately choose to deprive oneself of delight? These naysayers are no doubt fully prepared to reject this submission purely on the grounds of uncertainty, whatever their opinions as individuals may be. Well, to these hypotheticals, I say no! What good is conservative thinking to anyone? How does it compare to the wonder sparked in us all by the bizarre, the beautiful and the exceptional? Conservatism has achieved absolutely nothing worthy of memory or exultation; did Mr Audubon become the most talented and famed birder of all time, the ultimate virtuoso, by staying within the confines of what was current knowledge, dreading any kind of leap into the unknown? Did Mr Gould achieve immortality of both word and art, discovering so many of the most precious gems of our birdlife, by staying at home and twiddling his thumbs, terrified of making some kind of mistake? Has the great Mr Attenborough ever held back from investigating the world around him, and making his opinions therein known? This is all very

relevant to the case, since I'm here to make sure this bird is given the notoriety and recognition such a fine creature deserves, and if that takes a leap into the unknown, so be it! I have long yearned to make a discovery that is truly worthy of memory, sparking the same wonder I felt in this birds' presence in all who care to read of it, and more shall read of a Tristan, the bird I believe we have here, than a Gibson's or otherwise.

To be a birder or wildlife enthusiast of any kind is, in my humble opinion, to appreciate the creature itself, be that a Tristan Albatross or otherwise, rather than being shackled to the narrow-minded view of nature granted by dots on a graph or map, or to the cataloguing of invisible minutia in a laboratory somewhere; such exactitudes convey but little of the wonder that is conveyed by sticking one's neck out in the field. To go in pursuit of birds is about the thrill of the hunt in our quarry's wild, untamed homes, and that kick of excitement when we find what we seek at long last. Such is how I felt when finally tracking down the Tristan Albatross, the wonder I have always wished to inspire in others through my exploits and misadventures... and I can only do this with your help. To reject this submission would be to deprive those who love both rarity and logic of delight, rejecting it with nothing to say conclusively it's not a Tristan, what's more.

I know that you, as a committee devoted to the ways of science and logic, value consistency and impartiality; stick to your principles, I say! Let not such nit-picking trivialities as an obscured band code lead you astray from what is right and proper in our chosen field: the exultation of birds, the hunt for those beautiful singularities we call the rarities! If you can't tell what this creature is, I compel you to not fall on the side of "probably not", but "probably yes", and open your minds, and the minds of all who read of this record, to the Barnum-esque wonder of the rare and the bizarre! Let us exalt in the probability, which probably no one can rule out, that this is something truly special, and give this beautiful Albatross the celebration it deserves!!

Thus goes the reasoning, evidence and morals behind my firm belief that this is a Tristan Albatross. I begrudge you not your opinions, of course, whatever way you may vote; we all have differing thoughts, because that's how it is with us humans. Rather, I urge you to face the facts as they are not out of some polemical exercise in rhetoric, but in the very real hope that you too will acknowledge the extraordinariness of this Albatross, giving it its rightful place in the history books of the birds of Australia.

The ball, as they say, is in your court. I beg your deepest consideration of every single point I have made...

Section F: References and aids

<p>Did you use books, journal articles or on-line sites or pages to help you prepare this submission? Which ones?</p>	<p>I have read more books on birds, seabirds, Albatrosses and the like in my life than can really be listed here, and all could be regarded as preparing for this moment, considering they are vital to my understanding of these facts; as well as those sources mentioned above, I have also avidly read Onley and Schofield's seminal text, most of HANZAB, and also combed through the delights of the new seabird photographic guide whose name escapes me at this time.</p>
<p>Would you like to acknowledge the assistance of others in the identification process or preparation of this submission?</p>	<p>I would really like to acknowledge the importance to this report of all the remarkable people who work for Naturaliste Charters; they are the company that took us out on that unforgettable day. We left the harbour as acquaintances and returned as firm friends; they questioned me in a respectful, kindly fashion to prove all identifications of the day. Love and respect to them all!</p>