

# BRISBANE SEABIRD STUDY GROUP

## Rare Seabird Forms



(Completed forms to be passed on to BQRAC or BARC, where appropriate).

**Name:** Rob Morris

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**Vessel:** 46 ft Badenach monohull MV Grinner II

**Crew:** Craig Newton (skipper)

**No. of observers present:** 5

**Contact(s): (full name).** **Contact details: (include address, phone no(s). E-mail, etc.).**

- |                    |                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1). Elliot Leach   | hadalzones@gmail.com             |
| 2). Paul Walbridge | paul.walbridge@health.qld.gov.au |
| 3). Brian Russell  | bjr54@cloud.com                  |
| 4). Jon Norling    | Jon@norling.com.au               |

**Date of sighting:** 29/3/2020

**Time & duration of sighting:** 0635 hrs, for approx. two minutes.

**Species name:**

**Common:**  
White-bellied Storm-Petrel

**Scientific:**  
*Fregetta grallaria*

**No. of birds observed:** 1

**Location:** Britannia Sea Mount, 28 35.17S/155 32.97E. In 228 fathoms of water depth.

**Be precise & include GPS readings when possible.**

**Habitat (indicate in appropriate box).**

Bay/Inlet	Headland	River Mouth	Ocean Beach	Shelf Waters	Slope Waters	Open Ocean	Other
						X	

**Optical and/or other aids used:** Various pairs of high powered Leica & Swarovski binoculars plus Canon and Nikon camera g

**Prior experience with this species:** All on board except Elliot Leach had prior experience with this species.

**Confidence in sighting? (e.g. 90%, 100% etc.):** 100%

**Received:**

**BQRAC Case No:**

**BARC Case No:**

**Recommendation:**

(Office Use Only).

## FORM B

### **Weather Conditions: (including wind speed & direction).**

**27<sup>th</sup>** – A high over the central Tasman brought initially SE winds to 10-15 knots, increasing by the end of the day to 20-30 knots from the SE. Cloud cover increased as the day progressed and rain periods started to kick in more frequently at days end. Maximum air temp. 26° C, barometer 1020 hPa.

**28<sup>th</sup>** – The high over the Tasman persisted with the wind 20-25 knots SE early morning swinging around more to the E 10-15 knots, gusting occasionally to 20+ in front of the frequent heavy rain squalls. Mainly heavy cloud cover throughout the day, with occasional sunny patches, visibility average, maximum air temp. 25° C, barometer 1019 hPa.

**29<sup>th</sup>** – Winds had swung around to the NE 12-15 knots rising to 20-25 knots in front of increasing blustery, extensive rain squalls. Heavily overcast with the occasional sunny break in the clouds, visibility generally very average. Maximum air temp. 24° C, barometer 1020 hPa.

### **Sea Conditions: (including water temp. °C, when possible).**

**28<sup>th</sup>** – Very early morning when we left the Southport Seaway and seas progressively worsened as we left the coast with seas to 2 metres on about 2 metre swell easing during the day heading toward the Britannia Sea Mount, with seas to about 1.8 metres on a 1.5 metre swell. Sea surface temperature in slope waters early morning 27° C, dropping across deeper water to 25.2° C, then rising to a max of 27.4° along the sea mount ridge, the highest temps we have recorded out on the sea mounts.

**29<sup>th</sup>** – Early on, seas had dropped considerably on a low swell of about 1.5 metres, increasing at times in front of the frequent rain squalls but generally much more favourable than the previous days. Sea surface temps. ranging from 27.2° C to 27.7° C, higher temps than we have seen on the Britannia Sea Mount before.

### **General Observations: (include behaviour of bird(s), view, distance etc).**

**EL** first sighted and called the bird on the starboard side of the vessel and it was promptly identified by RM as a WBSP. It was not exactly close to the vessel, being around 35-40 metres at its closest but immediate close inspection of the back of the cameras confirmed Elliotts call. The bird never really approached close as can be seen by the fairly basic photos and didn't stay long but enough was seen to distinguish the bird in the field from Black-bellied Storm-Petrel and adequately backed up by the photographs.

### **Description of Bird(s): (be as detailed as possible).**

On initial views, the bird was clearly a medium to large 'black and white' storm-petrel with black upper parts, tail, head and upper chest, a distinctive white rump, white underparts and very bright white under-wing coverts forming a clear white bar on the otherwise blackish underwing. It was clearly larger than Wilson's Storm-Petrels which were also present. Based on shape and flight style it was clearly a 'Fregetta' Storm-Petrel.

As the bird flew passed the boat the it banked towards us three or four in small arcs before returning to erratic 'walking - flying' sequences across the surface. During this time the following features could be seen:

- The feet did not protrude beyond the end of the tail;
- The underparts were completely white with no black along the centre-line of the belly; in addition the border of where the white on the belly / breast met the black coming down the bird's throat was high on its chest, with the white forming a concave shape into the black. The black breast band aligned with the back leading edge of the underwing
- The white coverts on the underwing were extensive and lacked the black primary (and sometimes secondary) underwing coverts shown by Black-bellied Storm-Petrel.

The bird also showed a slightly paler covert bar in the upperwing. White-bellied Storm-Petrels also normally show a scaly back, with pale fringes to the mantle feathers. This feature was not noted in the field possible due to the distance, light, the short time it was on view and / or wear of the bird. Experience tells us that this feature is difficult to see at distance.

**See Photos 1-3.**

### **How was it distinguished from other similar species?:**

- **Wilson's Storm-Petrel:** This species was also present. It's smaller size, legs protruding beyond the tail tip and black underparts eliminate this species as a candidate.
- **'Coral Sea (New Caledonian) Storm Petrel:** This species was also present and is a similar sized bird. However, its legs protruding beyond the tail tip and black streaks on the white underparts eliminate this species as a candidate.
- **Black-bellied Storm-Petrel (see Photo 4):** this is the second commonest storm-petrel recorded in SEQ waters after Wilson's Storm Petrel. Black-bellied Storm-Petrel is the most similar species to White-bellied that occurs regularly in SEQ, and they are frequently called as 'White-bellied' on regular Southport trips by inexperienced seabirders. Whilst Black-bellieds can lack black on their belly (which causes the confusion), this species can be eliminated on 3 features:
  - the chest pattern - black-bellieds show more black coming down the chest especially in the center making the white form a convex shape. The chest band does not align with the black leading edge of the wing.
  - Its feet protrude beyond the end of its tail.
  - Its underwing show more extensive black in the primary and sometimes secondary coverts.

Other species of 'white bellied' storm-petrels which have been seen on the sea-mounts are Polynesian and White-faced. These species have very distinctly different plumages which can be eliminated without discussion based on the attached photos.

### **Other Comments:**

January to April (especially March – April) seems to be peak time for White-bellied Storm-Petrels off SEQ. Whilst they are normally seen as ones or twos, 2021 has shown that they can be relatively common off SEQ with weekend seamount trip counts of 10-20 birds on multiple trips.

### **Bibliography:**

Seabirds an identification guide (1985) Peter Harrison

Photographic Handbook of the Seabirds of the World (1997) by Jim Enticott and David Tipling

The Australian Bird Guide (2017) Menkhorst P, Rogers D, Clarke R, Davies J, Marsack P and Franklin K.\

Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photo Guide (2019) Steve N. G. Howell and Kirk Zufelt

**Form C**



Photo 1. White-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta grallaria*, Britannia Sea Mount 29/3/2020. B. Russell.



Photo 2. White-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta grallaria*, Britannia Sea Mount 29/3/2020. B. Russell.



Photo 3. White-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta grallaria*, Britannia Sea Mount 29/3/2020. R. Morris.



Photo 4. Black-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta tropica*, Southport August 2014. R. Morris.