

SHORT NOTE

Sightings of great shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) near New Zealand in 2006

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Great shearwaters (*Puffinus gravis*) breed in the southern Atlantic Ocean (Falklands; Tristan da Cunha; Gough I) and are known to range widely from the breeding islands (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Brooke 2004). They have been reported in the eastern Pacific from Cape Horn to Alaska. Great shearwaters are now regarded as a summer visitor in the southern part of Chile, especially near Cape Horn and in the Straits of Magellan (Clark *et al.* 1992; S. Howell, *pers. comm.*), and as vagrants to the central coast of Chile (Jamarillo, *pers. comm.*). Further north, there have been 9 sightings from the western seaboard of North America, given here with their respective Rare Birds Committee status: California, 24 Feb 1979 Monterey Bay (record accepted, rejected, then accepted again); 1-2 Oct 1994, Monterey Bay; 13-15 Jan 2001, Monterey Bay; 8 Oct 2001, Monterey Bay; 29 Aug, 2004, west of Bodega Bay, near Cordell Bank, Marin County, California; 15 Oct 2006, Monterey Bay (pending but good photographs); Washington, 24 Aug 2002, c.67 km off Gray's Harbor; 9 Sep 2006, off Westport, Washington (pending); Alaska, 3 Aug 2001, c.30km off southern coast of Montague Island (Todd McGrath, *pers. comm.*).

There are 8 records of great shearwaters from the southwest Pacific Ocean: 2 in South Australia (possibly of the same bird), Jan 1989 and February 1989, N. Cheshire (Marchant & Higgins 1990); 1 at Wollongong, New South Wales, 22 Apr 2006 (Baxter *et al.* 2006), and 3 records for New Zealand (2, Kermadec Is area, 1, Cook Strait; Jenkins 1968). The sightings described here are the 7th and 8th for the Southwest Pacific, if the reports in Jenkins (1968) are accepted; they were rejected by Bourne (1971)

on the grounds of insufficient detail consistent with the birds being great shearwaters.

In late Sep 2006, SW and CG were traveling between Gambier Is, French Polynesia and New Zealand aboard RV *Braveheart* and on 29 Sep were at 36° 10.6' S 172° 13.2' W, 450 nm ENE of the East Cape, North Is. We were on the foredeck with excellent viewing to both sides of the ship, in fine conditions and light winds. At 1543 h SW had a distant view of a "strange-looking Buller's [shearwater]". At 1549 h, while SW was at the stern checking fishing lines, CG saw a 'white-necked bird' flying towards the vessel, but which then veered away at about 100 m distant. Initially it looked to be a white-naped petrel (*Pterodroma cervicalis*) as it approached the vessel, but when it turned side-on it was clearly a shearwater. It had broad wings like a Buller's shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*), but they appeared dusky on the underside. The upper surfaces were not seen well and the bird moved away downwind quite rapidly.

We discussed these sightings over the next hour, and concluded that the bird could have been a great shearwater, but the observations were too limited. We considered that the bird was unlikely to be an aberrantly moulting Buller's shearwater. An opportunity to obtain better views and images presented itself at 1605 h when a similar, perhaps the same, bird flew by as close as 30 m, long enough for SW to take photographs (Fig.1a) and CG to check its field marks for a positive identification. CG had a clear view of the black cap to below the eye, conspicuous white neck, grey collar, obvious white scalloping or fringing of feathers on the mantle and scapulars creating a 'shawl-like' effect, dark remiges, grey back with crescentic white band just above the tail, and dark tail. The undersides were



Fig. 1 (a, b) a, Great shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) observed on 29 Sep 2006 in 36° 10.6'S 172° 13.2'W. Photo: Steve Wood. b, great shearwater, 31 Dec 2006, in 44° 20.912'S 176° 08.525'W. Photo: Hadoram Shirihai .

white except for a brown patch on the belly, and the underwings were pale-dusky with dark markings. No other birds were in the vicinity at the same time, so no comparisons of size, pattern, or flight could be made. Great shearwaters are known to follow ships regularly (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Harrison 1987; Enticott & Tipling 1997), and the same bird or a similar bird was seen 3 times before nightfall.

On 31 Dec 2006 a group of birdwatchers led by CG and HS were aboard MV *Clan Macleod* heading south along the eastern coast of Pitt I, north of Southeast I (Rangatira), in the Chatham Is, New Zealand. HS and CG, with several other observers, were standing together on the bridge at 1701 h, in 44° 20.912'S 176° 08.525'W, when a large shearwater passed across the bow. HS immediately

identified it as a great shearwater, and all those on the bridge were able to observe it clearly and it was photographed before it flew out of sight (Fig. 1b). Although we slowed the vessel, the bird did not circle back. Paul Gasson (New Zealand Department of Conservation) saw a white-naped petrel or shearwater between Main Chatham I and Western Reef on 23 Jan 2007 (C. Miskelly, *pers. comm.*).

We agree with Bourne (1971) that the birds seen by Jenkins (1968) could not be accepted from the published descriptions, because of potential confusion with *P. cervicalis* near the Kermadecs. However, that caveat would be less likely to be relevant to the Cook Strait sighting (Jenkins 1968) because no similar white-necked taxa are known for that area.

The 3 sightings for the SW Pacific in 2006 would support Bourne's (1971) suggestion that great shearwaters move across the southern Pacific Ocean and into Australasian waters. With more observers on board vessels traveling in this region there is a greater chance of detecting birds that may reach the Southwest Pacific. This is a long way from the solitary figure of Captain John Jenkins on his bridge but his observations form much of our knowledge of the occurrence and distribution of seabirds in large areas of the SW Pacific.

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