

Black-capped Petrels in Dominica and Elsewhere

A narrative in emails (among the *Pterodroma hasitata* group)

6 June to 11 June 2010

Author: Paul Scofield

Date: 7 June, 2010

Text:

A colleague from the IoZ, London Sam Truvey passed this information to me:

“While in Dominica, I was told by Arlington James at the Forestry department that a live black-capped petrel had been brought into the department in a shoebox by a local guy who found it on the road quite near to a place called Trafalgar (I think near Morne Trois Pitons in the central mountain range) – he thought it was a duck! Apparently the officials in Dominica reckoned that the last verifiable report of a black-capped petrel on the island was in 1922, and although there was a 1980s record this is apparently very dubious. Anyway, though you might be interested! For further information it might be worth contacting Arlington directly – his email address is: forestofficer@cwdom.dm”

I have not yet followed this up and thought someone closer to “the action” may wish too.

Author: Ruud van Halewijn, Netherlands

Date: 7 June, 2010

Text:

The report of at-sea work by Shirihai et al. (‘The Jamaican Petrel Pelagic Expedition’) in 2009, and in particular their notes on Guadeloupe and Dominica in early December of that year, was reason for me to check again the text and especially photograph of Black-capped Petrel in Peter G H Evans’ ‘Birds of the Eastern Caribbean’ (Macmillan, first ed. 1990, p. 17). The photo of head and neck of a hand-held bird shows an individual quite different from the bird (caught and photographed in Dominica by Arlington James in May 2007 (latter photo on p. 20 in the Shirihai et al. report.) I conclude from the photo credits in Evans’ book, that the photo in this book was made by Peter Evans. His photo shows a bird with a relatively long and slender bill, with very little light at base of bill, and the light parts of throat and neck not white but a brownish creamy colour.

The bird is unlike Jamaican Petrel (photos p. 82, Howell & Pattison, Alula 2008) and either ‘whitefaced’ or ‘blackfaced’ (Howell & Pattison; many photos) forms of Black-capped Petrel. Perhaps Peter Evans could make available to the group his photo(s) of this bird.

In his text, Evans writes:

“After fifty years without any definite records in the Lesser Antilles, black-capped petrels have been found again in Dominica [*i.e. pre-1990*], with individuals captured off the coast and seen flying inland; a small colony probably exists on one of the steep wooded mountains of the southeastern coast.”

It is therefore surprising that Shirihai et al. failed to find any Black-capped off Guadeloupe and Dominica. (Levesque published some observations January - March near Guadeloupe and Martinique.)

Let me add that (somewhat obscure) older publications mention at-sea observations of Black-capped in the southern margin of the Caribbean, off Venezuela/Colombia between approx. 69 and 73 W: Mörzner Bruijns (Ardea 1967: 144) observed them off Goajira, Colombia, May 1st, 1962 and Poppe and myself recorded the species several times between late April and late May (plus once December) off Curacao and Aruba in 1970 – 1972 (mentioned in book Voous, 1983).

Author: Adrian Delnevo, Ph.D.

Date: 7 June, 2010

Text:

In 1984 I spent almost seven months on Dominica from February – August as part of a multi-disciplinary ecological study team. Through-out June - August I made multiple trips up and around the slopes of Morne Diablotin in search of evidence (burrows, calling birds) for nesting pterodroma. I used continuous tape loops of other pteradroma species-calls to try and elicit a vocal response. I spent a total of nine (9) days and four (4) nights in search of pterodroma on Morne Diablotin. Between June 2nd and July 20th I conducted four off-shore surveys by joining local fishermen in their (very unstable) outrigger dug-out canoes. Using triangulation, I estimated that we travelled approximately 3.5 - 5 (max. 6) miles due east of the island. The fishermen used a variety of techniques to catch flying fish that were then used as bait for larger fish species. During this process there was a considerable amount of oily substances that were left on the sea surface that subsequently attracted many petrels, most notably, Wilsons Petrels. Several large, unidentified petrels were also observed. My previous experience observing pterodromas around Madeira led me to believe that many of these birds were pterodroma.

On June 20th 1984 one bird came very close to the canoe and I was able to catch it. The picture below is that bird taken on the day of capture. In the tremendous excitement, I had incorrectly identified this bird as a pterodroma. Clearly it is not a pterodroma. The bird was taken ashore, photographed, and a radio and a newspaper article compiled. I was even congratulated by the Prime Minister's office for having "re-found" the black-capped petrel. After much celebration the bird was released on the east coast and was seen flying strongly eastwards – presumably well aware of its own identification. The "dubious" record from the 1980s cited in the previous email, may be referring to this "record"? Perhaps my youthful excitement contributed to my error as I was indeed desperately keen to find a 'diablotin'. A bird in the hand is very different from the usual view of it in flight, and although I made a colossal error, I am nevertheless certain that at least some of the birds seen off-shore during those trips were pterodroma species.

My *mea culpa* aside, I had always hoped to return and conduct more extensive searches both ashore and at sea around Dominica. I may even get it right this time. If anyone is visiting Dominica I would urge them to go off-shore with an appropriate 'chum' to see what appears. In the 26 years since my error (and subsequent "confession") there have been many advances in field identification and I wish others a more qualified success.



Author: Dr Peter GH Evans

Date: 7 June, 2010

Text:

To clarify things a little, the photo in my East Caribbean bird book was taken by Adrian del Nevo (who was part of my team out there at the time), and is indeed not *Pterodroma hasitata*. I tried to get this changed by Macmillan when the book was in press, but unsuccessfully! I am hoping to do a new edition when this (and a few other errors will be corrected). However, Adrian was confident he saw *Pterodromas* offshore, and since then I have as well. Although I ran a project in Dominica involving annual visits between 1980 and 2000, we came at different seasons and offshore coverage as limited to relatively few pelagic trips so it was difficult to judge the status of the species in the region. However, we did try using tape loops of *P. hasitata* in the Morne Fou region (where they used to breed) and saw a petrel species flying over us at night one November. Earlier, in the 1970s one of the Forestry rangers found a bird on the ground on the slopes of Morne Diablotin that from the description sounded very like a *Pterodroma* but of course neither of these records can be confirmed. Since then Arlington James photographed and identified one that came ashore up the Roseau valley in May 2007. I shall be back in Dominica next spring, but meantime will check with folk in Dominica if there have been any more recent records (I'm not aware of any).

Author: Arlington James

Date: 9 June 2010

Text:

The bird referred to was actually collected by Vincent Theophile in May 2007, at the entrance to Trafalgar Village, in an area known as Padu. The area where the bird was collected is quite some distance from Morne Trois Pitons (check on Google Earth), but the mountain closest to the location of the "find" would be Morne Micotrin, just above the village of Laudat. Also, the

gentleman had indicated that the bird had certain characteristics like a duck; he did not think it was a duck! I guess he was referring to the bird's webbed feet.

Further examination of the carcass of the 2007 bird by petrel specialist Dr. David Wingate and others indicated that it was a breeding female!!!

The last record is from 1932 (not 1922), and we were shown (in a PowerPoint) a 1961 photograph of the skin of this bird, courtesy Dr. Wingate who visited Dominica again this past February. Their search at sea almost four months ago for BCP proved unsuccessful. Both Adrian and Dr P Evans have explained the situation with the 1984 bird that was caught off the south-east coast (Adrien included a photo. I may still have a slide of that bird from 1984. And when I showed the slide to someone at the 1993 SCO meeting in Cuba, I was told that that bird was NOT a BCP.

Author: Peter Evans

Date: 10 June, 2010

Text:

Hello Arlington,

Good to hear from you. I hope all is well with you. I sent this email earlier to Adrian, David and Ruud so hopefully explaining the confusion. I think Macmillan Press must have published two versions of my book, the first one without my correction but the second one with it. The picture of the shearwater in my book is definitely great shearwater and not a Pterodroma.

Author: Niels Larsen

Date: 11 June, 2010

Text:

There is a photo of the 2007 bird in the Dominica IBA document available at http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/sites/american_ibas/americas-ibas-downloads.html (thanks to Veronica Anadon for sending that link out)

Author: Ruud van Halewijn

Date: 11 June, 2010

Text: This is the same photo as is reproduced at the end of the Shirihai et al. report. The bird was collected on Dominica May 14, 2007. Study of this specimen by David Wingate last February revealed that it is an adult female with a well-developed brood patch.

Author: Ruud van Halewijn

Date: June 08, 2010

Text:

My copy of Evans' book is ISBN 0-333-52155-2, 1990, 162 pages, published by Macmillan Education Ltd. (On cover: "M Caribbean Pocket Natural History Series") bought in England, March 1991.

Two colour photos on p. 17:

Upper photo: head and neck of a petrel with a human hand at lower throat and upper breast of bird. Bill pointing to the right. Caption "Black-capped Petrel".

Especially form of bill but also various plumage characteristics shows this to be a Puffinus gravis.

Not mentioned in list of photos contributed by others, therefore photo by P G H Evans.

I suspect this to be the same individual as on b/w photo sent by Adrian, but Adrian's photo is not the b/w version of the colour photo in Evans' book, they are not identical.

Lower photo : Black Puffinus sitting on light-coloured rock. Caption "Audubon's Shearwater". Photographer M. de L. Brooke listed in photo credits.

I conclude that there are two versions of Peters' book, one with, another without the correction.

I attach three pdf's. These are various short contributions in the series 'Notes on Seabirds' at the time edited by prof. Voous for the Dutch ornithological journal 'Ardea'. (www.ardeajournal.nl and www.nou.nl). (You will need codes if you want to download more papers from Ardea. Let me know in case you want mine.) The three pdf's actually encompass some other (irrelevant) 'Notes on Seabirds' but nrs. 15, 19 and 24 discuss BCPE sightings (in 1962, 1965 and two of 1966).

Date: 10 June 2010

Author: Adrian Delnevo, Ph.D.

Text:

Ruud et al.

This is getting more and more strange. My book is the same ISBN-0-333-52155-2, with the title Birds of the Eastern Caribbean in yellow. On page 17 there are two photographs as described by Ruud but the top picture is labeled great shearwater (and that's what it is). AS I said earlier it is implied that this is the BCPE, but it clearly is not. The more I look at it, that may be my hand, but I am not totally sure. However, it's definitely not the same picture that I showed earlier. As I said, I cannot remember having a colour photograph of the bird, but time does play tricks with one's memory. Peter S over to you.

Date: 10 June

Author: Peter Evans

Text:

Hi Adrian,

Sorry if I confused you. That picture was one you gave me and I re-identified it as great shearwater. I pointed this out to Macmillan and they said they would ensure it was corrected. However, the version of the book they sent me didn't have it corrected. It sounds as if they did correct it then as requested by me, but this was in subsequent copies printed which I haven't seen. Hopefully that explains it!

Date: 11 June

Author: Katharine and David Lowrie

Text:

Arlington James kindly cced us on the email. My husband, David and I are partners with Environmental Protection In the Caribbean (EPIC) and compiling a Seabird Breeding Atlas for the Lesser Antilles. The two year project is to be completed at the end of July 2010 and the Atlas will be available to all at the end of 2010 at www.epicislands.org . During our surveys of Dominica in February 2010 we hosted David Wingate on our sailing boat and together searched for Black-capped Petrel as well as other breeding seabirds on the island.

As Arlington James alluded to David Wingate prepared the Black-capped Petrel skin with brood patch which had been collected in 2007. David can provide more details on this, see attached pictures.

Our surveys for Black-capped Petrels included offshore transects and finally revealed one bird South East of the island banking vertically on the horizon at 1810. We considered it 95% likely to be Black-capped Petrel- considering its flight, behaviour and positioning. In addition, whilst sailing north on the 2 May, at 1816, we observed a bird 45 miles West of the South Dominican coastline, it was banking steeply and was considered likely to be a Black-capped Petrel (unfortunately the bird was too far away to take decent photos).

