

CHAPTER 6

RECENT SIGHTINGS OF BLACK-CAPPED PETRELS

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POSSIBLE BREEDING COLONY IN CUBA

It is believed that Black-capped Petrels (*Pterodroma hasitata*) historically bred in the south-eastern coastal slopes of the Sierra Maestra mountain range. A presumed breeding colony was discovered in December 1976 by Nicasio Viña on Monte La Bruja near Ocuja (Bond 1978, Garrido 1985). This mountain shares its name with a nearby town, as well as an adjacent point of land also named La Bruja where the petrels are known to feed at night. Locals in the area reported hearing strange nocturnal sounds in 1976 which N. Viña assured residents were birds, not demons or witches (Garrido 1985). Six Black-capped Petrel specimens were collected by Cuban Ornithologists affiliated with the Havana National Museum of Natural History as they were coming ashore at dusk. Although this potential breeding colony was never found as the cliffs within the Sierra Maestra range are largely inaccessible, there is additional recent evidence to suggest that a stronger survey effort in this area is warranted.

On 24 February 2004, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology conducted a Rapid Biological Inventory at Parque Nacional La Bayamesa, Cuba, including a survey for Black-capped Petrels. N. Viña led the biologists to a remote site along the coast directly below the Sierra Maestra where the petrels had previously been seen (Farnsworth et al. 2005). Up to 46 Black-capped Petrels were observed from the bluffs forming several tight flocks on the water just offshore at dusk. After dark, continued vocalizations from the birds indicated that at least some of

the petrels flew ashore near a narrow stream valley up the steep mountainside towards the Sierra Maestra peaks. An additional 25 birds were sighted at the same location on 9 February 2004.

The birds' behavior of massing just offshore and then flying inland at dusk is consistent with breeding in other *Pterodroma* species. In regards to these sightings, D. Forsell (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pers. comm.) commented that 'Petrels don't go up into mountains or hang around shores unless they are breeding and I would consider that confirmed. Most petrels and shearwaters go ashore at dusk or in the dark and leave before first light. I would consider flocks of birds sitting on the nearshore waters at dusk a sure thing, but seeing or hearing them calling going ashore as good as finding a nest.' Garrido (1985) felt that this breeding site was safe, as it is almost unreachable by people.

AT-SEA SIGHTINGS

At-sea sightings of Black-capped Petrels have largely been documented off the southeastern United States between Cape Canaveral, Florida and Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. There are two known databases of at-sea records for Black-capped Petrels, one by David Lee (North Carolina State Museum of Natural Science), and another compiled by Brian Patteson (Seabirding) during pelagic birding trips. Additional sightings by Chris Haney, from his dissertation research at the University of Georgia looking at the ecology of gulf-stream eddies, which will be examined as well. These data, including location information, are currently being compiled from handwritten notes and will be included in the final report. In addition to producing GIS maps of all at-sea sightings, we will determine a relative measure of sightings per effort (e.g., # birds/hour) if sufficient data are available. If successful, this assessment of relative abundance could provide a first step in understanding the size of the foraging population of Black-capped Petrels using the gulf-stream waters offshore of the southeastern United States, as

well as their seasonal use patterns. We have included a reprint of the at-sea sightings of Black-capped Petrels by D. Lee (Figure 1, Lee and Socci 1989).

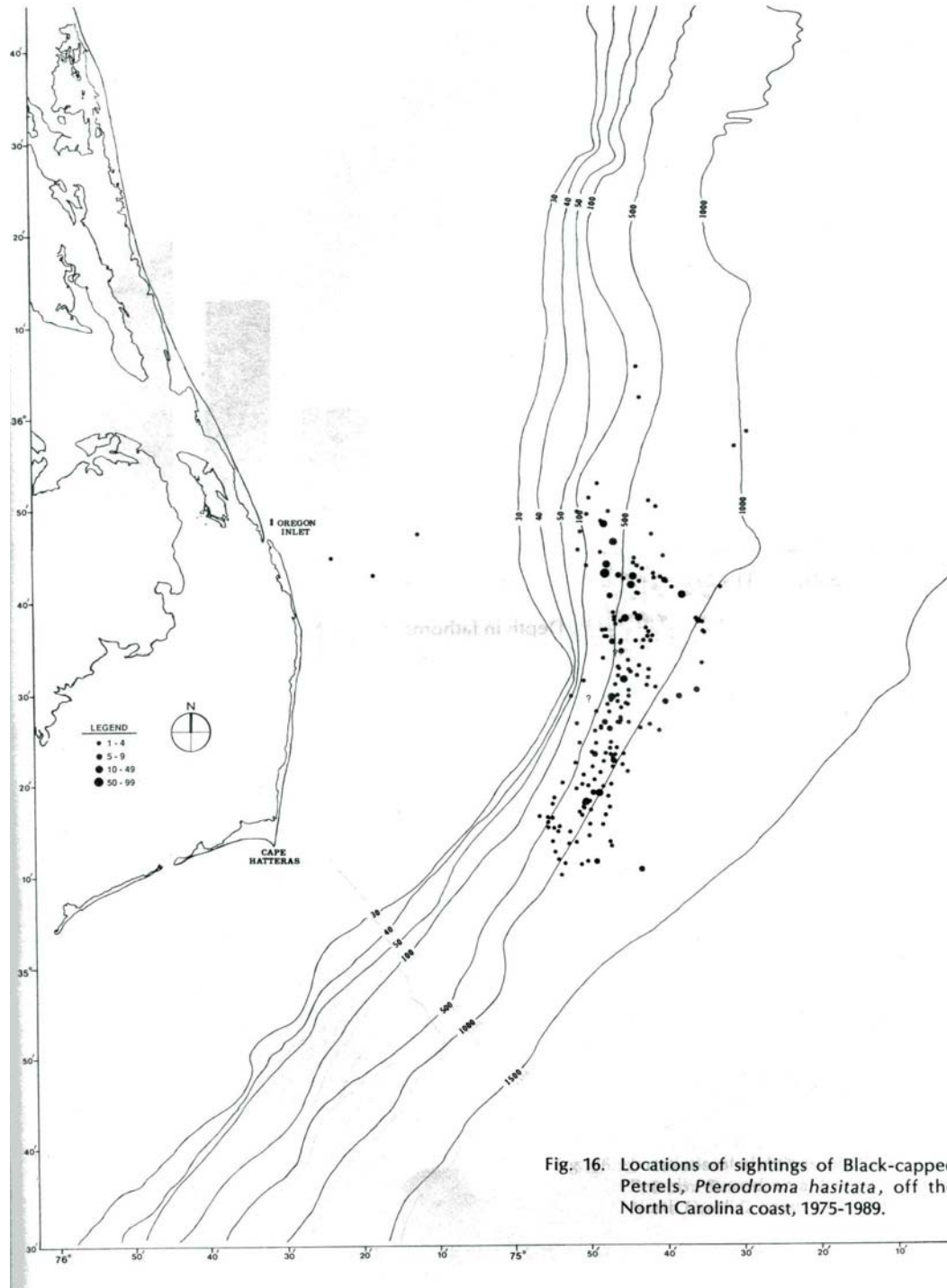


Figure 2. David Lee's at-sea sightings of Black-capped Petrels off Cape Hatteras, NC, from 1975-1989 (reprinted from Lee and Socci 1989).

PETRELS CALLING AT DOMINICAN REPUBLIC COLONY

David Shoch (The Nature Conservancy) visited Loma de Toro in the Sierra de Baoruco, Dominican Republic, from 17-18 November 2006, and listened for Black-capped Petrels from the trail at the base of the ridge on the 17th from 21:10 – 23:00. Conditions were mostly clear skies, no moon, calm, and chilly. At least two Black-capped Petrels were heard and recorded, although there may have been more. His associate Carlos Perez (a guardarecurso from Puerto Escondido who accompanied the Simons group in 2002) reported also hearing a petrel calling on 13 November 2006 from the guard station (caseta) #2, further east along the ridge. Although the data remains unconfirmed, Carlos reported to David that two additional research or tourist groups (one each from Cuba and Germany) had visited the site looking for Black-capped Petrels in the past two years. He claimed that an unspecified research group had found two eggs and two chicks from Black-capped Petrel nests, but we have no confirmed knowledge of this event.

GROUNDING PETREL IN HAITI

A Black-capped Petrel was found by Philippe Bayard (Société Audubon Haïti) in Morne Tranchant, Haiti, which is one to one and a half hours from Petion-Ville at 1900 metres elevation (Figure 2). The local man who found the bird would not divulge any additional information on the circumstances of its appearance for fear of reprisal.



Figure 2. Photographs of a Black-capped Petrel grounded on 13 March 2006 at Morne Tranchant, Haiti.

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