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Wandering albatross: pp 19-21.



WANDERING ALBATROSS
(New Zealand Albatross and Snowy Albatross)

Family Diomedidae

Species *Diomedea antipodensis* and *D. exulans*

Common names Wandering Albatross, New Zealand Albatross, and Snowy Albatross

Status Circumpolar

Abundance Uncommon

Size 750 – 1200 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm)

Species Four species of Wandering Albatross are recognised. Common to New Zealand are the Snowy Albatross (*D. exulans*) and Antipodean Albatross (*D. antipodensis*). Two subspecies of Antipodean are recognised – the Antipodean Albatross (*D. a. antipodensis*) – **above**, found in southern waters and Gibsons Albatross (*D. a. gibsoni*), generally found in New Zealand waters. The Snowy Albatross (*D. exulans*) is also found in southern waters.

Breeding islands close to New Zealand *D. a. gibsoni*, Auckland Islands, and *D. a. antipodensis*, Antipodes Island and Campbell Island. The Snowy Albatross, *D. exulans*, breeds on the Macquarie Islands, plus other islands to the south of South America.

Breeding months Starts in January. Young birds leave the nest one year later. The parental pair then have one year's rest before egg laying again.

Range worldwide The southern oceans north to the Tropic of Capricorn, occasionally straggling further north.

New Zealand range Gibsons Albatross (*D. a. gibsoni*), around New Zealand but more common in winter months. Antipodean Albatross (*D. a. antipodensis*) and Snowy Albatross (*D. exulans*) are more common in southern waters.

Description – mature bird – Gibsons Albatross

Head White. **Upperwing** White, darkening to black on secondaries and primaries.

Underwing White, with black trailing edges and tips to primaries, and a thin black line from wing tip to carpal joint on leading edges. **Upperparts** White.

Underparts White, with grey darkening on neck. **Tail** White, usually tipped with black on both under and upper edges. (Sometimes the black is absent.) **Bill** Pink, with a faint yellow tip.

Description – mature bird – Snowy Albatross

Upper and underparts Similar to Gibsons but whiter and sometimes all white.

Description – mature bird – Antipodean Albatross

Upper and underparts Similar to Gibsons but darker.

Description – immature bird – all subspecies

Birds vary with maturity but range from – **Face** White. **Upperparts** Pure black.

Underwings White, with primaries on trailing edges lined with black. **Underparts** Black. **Tail** White, tipped with various amounts of black – to variations of black upperparts and underparts with the black slowly being replaced by white in stages.

Differences between Wandering and Royal Albatrosses

It is difficult to separate adult Wanderings from adult Royals at sea. The Northern Royal is the easiest to separate but the Southern Royal and the Wandering can nevertheless be identified. Pointers to aid separation are –

- Royals have a distinct black bill line between the upper and lower mandibles. This is the first pointer to look for.
- Wandering Albatrosses usually show some breast darkening.
- Royals (Northern and Southern) have totally white breasts and abdomen. Should a Royal have white on the upper wings it is almost certainly a Southern Royal.
- Wandering Albatrosses have black tips to undertail feathers.
- Royal (Northern) has some black undertail markings.
- Royal (Southern) has no black undertail markings.
- Wandering Albatrosses have black tips to uppertail.
- Royals have no black uppertail tips.
- Wandering Albatrosses have some white on primary and secondary upperwings feathers. This is similar to the Southern Royal. However Northern Royals have totally black upperwings.
- Northern Royals have very dark leading edges to the underwing with the black extending heavily from end of wing to carpal joint.

Juvenile Wandering Albatrosses are usually birds with:

- Large amounts of upper black markings.
- Traces of black around the head and upper back.
- Blotchy black and white upperwing markings.

Where to find – North and South Island

This wide ranging bird can be seen off the New Zealand coast and should be watched for on any seabird excursion.

North Island – A seabird excursion from Sandspit in North Auckland is a possible way to see one. P. 289.

South Island – Kaikoura is a reliable place to see one. P. 345.

ALBATROSSES

From Page 19

“Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters of the World”, by Derek Onley and Paul Scofield (2007), lists 13 species and subspecies of albatross for New Zealand waters. These are likely to be seen if the time of year is right for that species. This makes New Zealand an important seabird venue.

Note about names In New Zealand the species of albatross which have white backs, the Wandering Albatross and the Royal Albatross, are called albatrosses. The other species and subspecies in the family Diomedidae, all with black upperwings and black backs, are called mollymawks. The Sooty and Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, in the genus *Phoebastria*, retain the name albatross.

Mainland nesting sites Only one species of albatross, the Northern Royal Albatross (*Diomedea sanfordi*), nests on mainland New Zealand. All the other species nest on offshore islands from the Chatham Islands south to the Campbell Islands.

“Beach-wrecked” birds Birds collected by members from the Ornithological Society of New Zealand over many years, indicate that all the albatrosses listed here are found in waters right around New Zealand. Auckland west coast beaches, for example, have provided dead birds of all listed species.

Although these birds range widely, they are only in northern waters during the winter months. Generally they do not come close to the shoreline, but during rough weather, Wandering Albatrosses have been known to enter Auckland Harbour near Rangitoto Island, and are recorded in Wellington Harbour. The southern waters, from Cook Strait south, provide the best opportunities to view these birds as they are closer to the breeding grounds.

Note Permission is required from the Department of Conservation to visit most of the seabird nesting islands.

Seabird places and excursions ideas Seabird excursions and land-based seabird sighting places are recorded in the back of the book – Sandspit excursions, P 289; Kaikoura excursions, P 345; land sites, P 376.