

Sooty albatrosses are slender sooty brown and grey birds with black bill, long narrow wings and very long pointed tail.

SOOTY ALBATROSS *Phoebastria fusca*

Rare vagrant

80 cm, 2.5 kg. Adult is entirely sooty brown except slightly darker on head and wings, white eye-ring, and pale shafts to primaries and tail. Bill (112 mm) slender, black with yellow line along lower bill; legs and feet pale grey-flesh. Juvenile similar but buff scalloping on collar and sides of neck; ash-grey nape, grey eye-ring and grey line along lower bill. **Habitat:** Breeds subantarctic and subtropical Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Recorded a few times in NZ waters. [Sp 16]



ALBATROSSES

Diomedidae

14 species, 11 with breeding restricted to the Southern Hemisphere and 3 in the North Pacific.\* In the New Zealand region, 10 species have been recorded including 2 endemic species and 5 other breeding species.

Albatrosses and mollymawks (the common name in New Zealand for smaller albatrosses) are a clearly defined group of very large seabirds belonging to the tube-nosed petrel order (Procellariiformes). Although they are among the largest of all flying birds, albatrosses are noted for their perfection of soaring flight behind boats and among the tempestuous seas of the southern oceans. In strong winds, they wheel effortlessly on very long, narrow and stiffly held wings for hours, but in almost calm conditions they have a flapping flight and more usually rest on the surface until the wind picks up. Their webbed feet are used for swimming and as rudders in flight, especially when coming in to land.

Albatrosses have long bills with a strongly hooked tip and small, raised tubular nostrils on either side near the base. The shape and colour of the bill plates can be useful in

identifying beach-wrecked specimens, but at sea the head colour and pattern of black on the wings is also important to note.

They nest in loose colonies, mainly on uninhabited and often inaccessible islands of the southern oceans. At their breeding grounds they have an elaborate series of displays accompanied by neighs, groans, baahs, wails, croaks, cackles, and bill-snapping and clapping. All species lay 1 white egg, usually in a shallow depression on top of a pedestal ('chimney pot') made of vegetation and mud. Incubation takes 66-83 days. Nestlings are downy and take many months to reach flying age. With this long breeding cycle, some species can nest only every second year if they have bred successfully.

Albatrosses feed mainly on various squids, fish and offal, on or close to the surface. Some species are readily attracted to boats and follow them for hours, occasionally alighting to pick up scraps cast overboard or food disturbed in the wake. Some are especially attracted to fishing boats, and in recent years several species have suffered high mortality from being drowned in trawl nets or after

taking baited fish-hooks on tuna long-lines. Research is under way to develop new methods to reduce seabird by-catch problems. **Reading:** Harrison, P. 1987. *Seabirds of the World: a photographic guide*. London: Christopher Helm. Harrison, P. 1988. *Seabirds: an identification guide*.

London: Christopher Helm. Murphy, R.C. 1936. *Oceanic Birds of South America*. New York: MacMillan. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds*. Sydney: Reed. Warham, J. 1990. *The Petrels: their ecology and breeding systems*. London: Academic Press.

16. SOOTY ALBATROSS *Phoebastria fusca*

Plate 6

**Size:** 80 cm, 2.5 kg

**Distribution:** Circumpolar, breeding on subantarctic islands between 36 and 49°S in the South Atlantic and South Indian Oceans. The biggest colonies are on Gough Island and Tristan da Cunha. They disperse eastwards along the Subtropical Convergence to deep waters south of Australia and up the eastern seaboard towards the Great Barrier Reef. Three records in New Zealand waters: Auckland Islands (February 1991); Pukaki

Rise, southeast of Otago (November 1993); and Antipodes (November 1995).

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly squid, but fish, krill and carrion such as small seabirds are also taken. Most prey is seized while swimming, but birds occasionally plunge from just above the surface. Sooty Albatrosses often follow boats and feed on scraps cast overboard.

**Reading:** Weimerskirch, H. et al. 1987. *J Anim Ecol* 56: 1043-1056. Weimerskirch, H. et al. 1986. *Ibis* 128: 195-213.