



A New Species of Seabird

A new species of storm-petrel found in Chile

Monday 21 February 2011

A new species of seabird has been found. The discovery follows recent sightings of unidentified storm-petrels in Seno Reloncavi, immediately south of Puerto Montt, Chile and the subject of a recent note in Dutch Birding (O'Keefe *et al* 2010). Following permissions from Servicio Agrícola y Ganadero (SAG, permit number 0049), a five-person team of biologists, led by British seabird expert Peter Harrison, have just completed a ten-day expedition to the area. The expedition followed Harrison's earlier examination of two skins of *Oceanites* spp. These specimens are housed in the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales, Buenos Aires, Argentina and have been described by Pearman as the first Argentinian records of Elliot's Storm-petrel, *Oceanites gracilis* (Pearman 2000) Harrison, on examining the specimens, however, concluded that the two *Oceanites* specimens originally collected at El Bolson, Rio Negro province in Argentina in February 1972 and November 1983 represented a hitherto undescribed taxon of *Oceanites* and were probably the mysterious unidentified storm-petrels of Puerto Montt, which is just 70 km west of El Bolson.

Important to the success of the expedition was the involvement of Chilean ornithologist Dr. Michel Sallaberry Ayerza of Departamento de Ciencias Ecologicas, Facultad de Ciencias de la Universidad de Chile. Harrison also enlisted the knowledge and expertise of Chris Gaskin and Karen Baird of New Zealand, both involved in at-sea captures and searches for the breeding location of the recently rediscovered New Zealand Storm-Petrel, *Pealeornis maoriana* (Gaskin & Baird 2005, Stephenson *et al*, 2008, Gaskin unpublished Dept of Conservation report, Feb 2010). The expedition spent four days at sea in the Seno Reloncavi area where they made use of chum or berley (fish scraps) to attract resident seabirds within range of the specially designed net guns. The net guns were critical to the success of the expedition and were developed in New Zealand for the capture of the New Zealand Storm-Petrel.

Over the four day at-sea period of the expedition over 1500 sightings of the new *Oceanites* species were recorded. To assist with the scientific description of the new species twelve birds were captured for collection of biometric data and samples of blood and feathers for genetic work.

The new *Oceanites* species would appear to be most closely related to Elliot's storm petrel, *Oceanites gracilis* but in appearance is intermediate between Wilson's Storm-Petrel, *Oceanites oceanicus* and New Zealand Storm-Petrel and shows a distinctive pale upper wing-crescent and a prominent white bar across the underwing coverts. Unlike typical Elliot's Storm-Petrel the white feathering in the ventral area is much more subdued and restricted and does not extend towards the upper breast. The wing measurements are also very different and show no overlap with mainland Elliot's Storm-Petrel *Oceanites gracilis gracilis*.

The five-person expedition team estimate a population of at least 10,000 birds in the Seno Reloncavi area where the new taxon appears to be the most abundant of the resident seabirds with flocks at chum slicks of several hundred individuals. The timing of the expedition also appears to have coincided with the fledging period as juveniles have been among the captured birds suggesting breeding occurs in Seno Reloncavi area, possibly beginning in November. A wider search of the Seno Reloncavi and Golfo de Ancud area needs to be undertaken in both summer and winter. Further analysis on feather and blood samples is expected to confirm this discovery and a full scientific publication with detailed biometric, behavioural and morphological data is in preparation by the expedition team.

All photos ©Peter Harrison

Figure 1: Dorsal view of the new storm-petrel (adult in fresh plumage)

Figure 2: Adult bird showing heavy wing moult



Figures 3, 4: Underside views of the new storm-petrel (both juvenile birds)



Figure 5: The New Zealand net-gun in action (with kiwis Chris Gaskin and Karen Baird in dinghy)

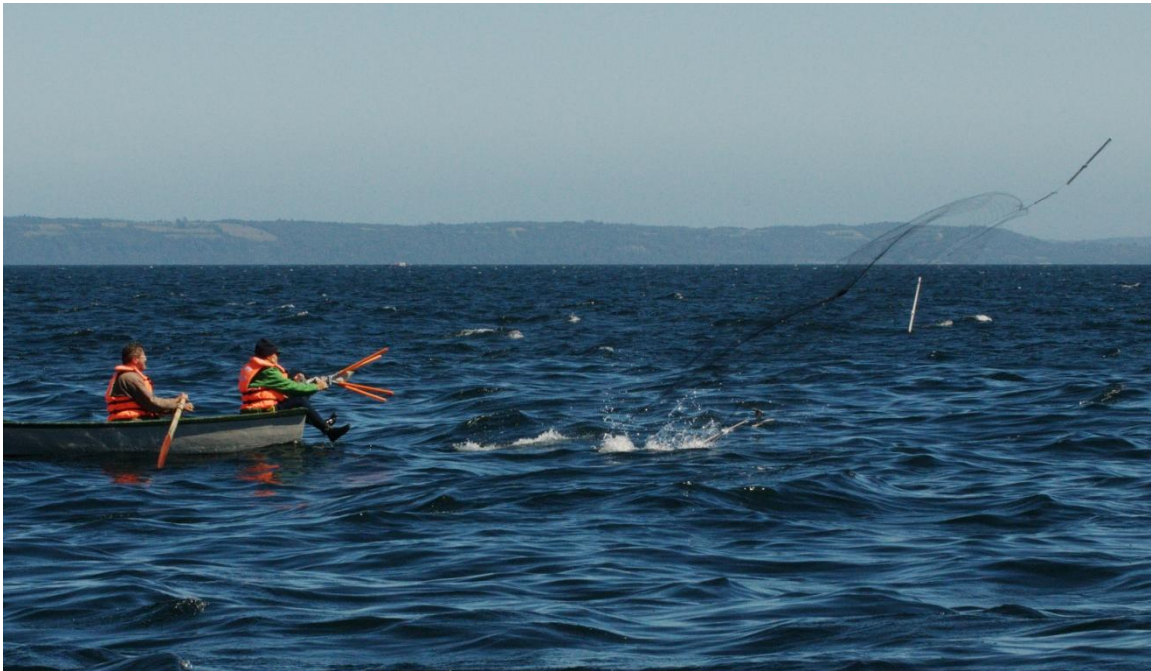


Figure 6: Expedition team at Puerto Montt, Chile 19 February 2011 (clockwise from lower right): Peter Harrison, Shirley Metz, Karen Baird, Chris Gaskin, Michel Sallaberry Ayerza



Primary contact:

Peter Harrison
Seattle, USA
zapville@olypen.com

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