

A Leach's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* off the United Arab Emirates

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Since 2010, pelagic trips exploring the northern Gulf of Oman, UAE, mainly out of the port of Kalba, have resulted in several exciting discoveries (Campbell *et al* 2017). On 25 May 2018, a Leach's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* was observed. This is a very rare species throughout the Indian ocean with few well-documented records. The bird was first noted at c1630 h at 25° 11.11' N, 57° 00.68' E, 67 km east of Fujairah. Even at long range, the bird looked strikingly different from Wilson's Storm-petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* seen that day. Structure and shape were distinctive and more reminiscent of Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *H. monorhis*, the only other storm-petrel species recorded on previous trips. A closer approach was made and the bird was pursued for almost 10 minutes, observed at close range, and photographed and videoed (Plates 1–4).

FIELD CHARACTERS

Compared to Wilson's Storm-petrel, the bird had very long and narrow, scythe-shaped wings, a rather slim body, and longer, slightly narrower tail. Overall size appeared rather greater, mainly due to the much longer wings. Flight was effortless and bounding, and was distinctive and notably different from the 27 Wilson's Storm-petrels seen that day. Video footage illustrates the flight and can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eezkPaAwI80&feature=youtu.be>. Plumage was brown-washed black, somewhat ashy-toned, unlike the darker, relatively blackish tones typical of Wilson's Storm-petrel. The overall paler effect was emphasized by a rather broad and diffuse curving ulnar bar that reached the leading edge of the wing. White uppertail coverts were clearly visible, but rather restricted and just wrapped over to the underside, whereas they wrapped around to the thighs on the Wilson's Storm-petrels. A diffuse, dark central line down the white 'rump' is evident in photographs though was difficult to see in the field. The rump pattern matched birds scored as 2–2.5 by Howell *et al* (2009); such values are typical for Leach's Storm-petrels of the nominate subspecies.

IDENTIFICATION

A combination of size, wing structure and plumage features, in particular the obvious white uppertail-coverts with diffuse dark central band, combine to rule out almost all other possible species from both recently recognized storm-petrel families, 'Northern' *Hydrobatidae* and 'Southern' *Oceanitidae* (Carboneras & Bonan 2018). Leach's Storm-petrel is a member of the former family but, of those species, only Wedge-rumped Storm-petrel *Hydrobates tethys* and the critically endangered (presumed extinct) Guadalupe Storm-petrel *H. macrodactylus* closely resembles Leach's Storm-petrel. Given a tiny range (off northwest Mexico) and no definite records since 1912 (BirdLife International 2018), the latter species can be discounted. The former is common in the eastern tropical Pacific (Carboneras *et al* 2018b) but as a rule has much more extensive white uppertail coverts, which greatly exceed the extent of black visible on the tail. An obvious tail-fork is typical of Leach's Storm-petrel and views in the field seemed to detect this. However, close examination of images indicates that the tail is very worn, making any interpretation of exact shape inadvisable. A more realistic identification problem is Band-rumped Storm-petrel *Hydrobates castro*, widespread across the tropical and subtropical Atlantic and Pacific oceans and reported from Eilat, Israel (Shirihai 1996) and the Maldives (Anderson 2007). Separation of



Plate 1 (above left). Leach's Petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* 67 km east of Fujairah, UAE, 25 May 2018. © Richard Stansfield Note rather brownish tone to head, mantle and covert feathers, with rather broad, pale ulnar bar reaching the carpal. The dusky line down the centre of the rump is obvious. The bill looks long but not especially heavy.



Plate 2 (above right). Leach's Petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* 67 km east of Fujairah, UAE, 25 May 2018. © Jacky Judas As well as plumage features, note the very long wings with narrow bases, prominent carpal angle and long, pointed tips.



Plate 3. Leach's Petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* 67 km east of Fujairah, UAE, 25 May 2018. © Oscar Campbell A gap in the left wing where the third (or fourth) primary should be is symmetrical with a gap on the right wing (Plate 1). This may indicate moult, with the third (or fourth) primary regrowing. If this interpretation is correct, it indicates a second calendar year bird, which initiate moult in April (Cramp & Simons 1977). Adults moult post breeding and have normally completed by late winter or early spring, although a few are later than this and are still regrowing their outermost primaries in late spring (RL Flood *in litt*). However it is not certain that the gaps genuinely indicate moult (rather than damage) and a second calendar year bird might be expected to have older, more worn primaries than this bird seems to exhibit. For these reasons, aging is uncertain.

this species from Leach's Storm-petrel has been well studied in the North Atlantic (eg Flood & Fisher 2013; see also Flood 2012) and, given a good view, is fairly straightforward. Structural differences are important; the rather angular wings with narrow, pointed primaries markedly swept back, rather slim body and relatively light bill support the identification as Leach's, as do the rather deep, languid wingbeats in travelling flight. With regard to plumage, whilst subject to some variation, on typical Band-rumped the ulnar bar is weaker, fading as it reaches the leading edge of the wing and the narrow white 'rump' lacks a dark, diffuse dividing line (although a hint of a dark line may be shown by any white-rumped species if feathers are dislodged; RL Flood *in litt*). This record was accepted as a Leach's Storm-petrel by the Emirates Birds Records Committee in September 2018.



Plate 4. Leach's Petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* 67 km east of Fujairah, UAE, 25 May 2018. Collage to illustrate wing posture. © Mark Smiles

DISCUSSION

Leach's Storm-petrel breeds in the north Atlantic and north Pacific oceans as far south as California (nominate subspecies) with three further subspecies, recently proposed as full species (Howell *et al* 2009), breeding on islands off northwest Mexico (Carboneras *et al* 2018a, where all are currently treated as subspecies). All three of these (sub)species are short-distance migrants, with long-distance vagrancy unlikely, whilst rump pattern, brownish cast to the plumage and long wings are possibly supportive of the identification as a bird of the nominate subspecies (T McGrath *in litt*), although any differences are quite subtle (RL Flood *in litt*). Pacific birds winter to 5°S whilst those from northern Atlantic colonies reach the coasts of Brazil and South Africa (Carboneras *et al* 2018a). Despite being recently discovered to breed on Dyer island, South Africa (Whittington *et al* 2001), there are very few records of Leach's Petrel from the Indian ocean. In the southern Indian ocean, there is a specimen record from Kenya (Laphorn *et al* 1970) and a recent record from Mozambique (Copete 2016). The only documented records in the northern Indian ocean appear to be a bird from the Maldives in April 1998 (Anderson & Baldock 2001; although, in the absence of photographs or a specimen, this record was not included by Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and from Sharjah, UAE, on the Arabian gulf coast (see below). There are no records from Oman (Eriksen & Victor 2013) and, although the eight records of birds observed in the Red sea off Eilat, Israel, 1980–1990 were believed at the time to have been Leach's Storm-petrels, there is now some doubt about the identification of the birds involved in these records (Granit 2016). There is also a record of a trapped bird at southern Sinai, Egypt, in August 1978 (Granit 2016). The record from the UAE in 1969 was documented by Laphorn *et al* (1970). The circumstances are rather odd, although there is no reason to doubt the identification. The bird was found dead, apparently hit by a car, on a roadside at Sharjah airfield on 8 June 1969. It was not immediately collected, but was gathered three weeks later. The mummified specimen was preserved and is held at the British Museum, Tring, UK. Unfortunately, meteorological data during or prior to the sighting are not discussed, although timing and location of the record are consistent with a bird migrating north in the 'wrong' ocean and then becoming trapped and eventually exhausted in the Arabian gulf as it attempted to continue north. Whilst there is no reason to connect the 2018 bird to adverse weather, it is worth noting that its occurrence was

simultaneous with the passage of cyclone Mekunu moving north from Socotra island, Yemen–Salalah, Oman, where wind speeds reached 170 km/h. Given the occurrence of Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* in previous years (Campbell *et al* 2013), this record does not represent the first occurrence of a North Atlantic breeding species that winters as far south as western South Africa, reaching UAE waters. However, the North Pacific as an alternative origin for this bird cannot be discounted either, given the occurrence of Swinhoe's Storm-petrels in small numbers in UAE waters (Campbell *et al* 2017).

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