BIRDS TO WATCH
Campbell Albatross off Africa

PETER RYAN

ED DUNENS /CREATIVE COMMONS

The Campbell Albatross only breeds on sub-Antarctic Campbell Island, 650 kilometres south of New Zealand. Once treated as a subspecies of the Black-browed Albatross, some 21 000 pairs breed on Campbell Island, together with about 30 pairs of Black-browed Albatrosses. And although the two species hybridise occasionally, they differ genetically and are now regarded as distinct species. Adults are best identified by their pale, honey-coloured eyes, although they also tend to have somewhat more extensive black margins to the underwing than adult Black-brows. Juveniles are probably not separable from Black-browed Albatrosses.

The at-sea distribution of Campbell Albatrosses is not well known. Until recently, they were thought to be largely confined to the seas around New Zealand, from south-western Australia east to the central Pacific Ocean at around 135°W. However, a new study by David Thompson and colleagues coming out in *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems* shows that adults range more widely than previously thought.

The study was based on tracks of 68 adult Campbell Albatrosses equipped with geolocator tags in 2009 and 2010. Although most adults remained within the known range, some birds tagged in 2010 wintered off the coast of Chile, much farther east than previously recorded, and other birds ventured farther west than previously known, reaching the central Indian Ocean at around 90°E. However, most exciting for birders in southern Africa was a single bird tagged in 2009 that travelled right around the Southern Ocean, passing close to South African territorial waters.

This was the first time that an annually breeding albatross has been tracked circumnavigating the Southern Ocean. Grey-headed Albatrosses do it quite regularly, as do some Wandering Albatrosses (including one impressive male from Marion Island that went around three times in a year), but both of these species are biennial breeders that typically take a year off between successful breeding attempts.

The bird in question travelled across the South Pacific before rounding Cape Horn into the South Atlantic Ocean. It appeared to be making a bee-line for the Cape, but it turned more to the south near Gough Island and headed into Antarctic waters, eventually reaching Prydz Bay at around 70°E, before heading north-east towards Western Australia. But just as it looked as though it was heading for familiar waters, it turned back west, passing Heard Island and Kerguelen and south of the Crozets and Marion Island to end up about 500 kilometres south of Cape Agulhas. Here it turned north-east, heading parallel to the South African coast to about Durban, when it then travelled due east, passing south of Madagascar and continued east until it was off Western Australia at roughly 23°S.

Geolocator tracks are far from precise – accurate to perhaps 200 kilometres – so it is unclear whether it entered the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that is usually taken to be the boundary for adding birds to the southern African list. However, it almost certainly passed through the Prince Edward Islands' EEZ and thus should be added to the South African list.

Overall, the study found that adult Campbell Albatrosses tend to occur mainly in oceanic waters, whereas Black-browed Albatrosses spend more time along shelf edges. During summer, some adults venture far south into the mouth of the Ross Sea, beyond 70°S. However, in winter they favour warmer waters, usually more than 15 degrees Celsius.

Confirmation that some adult Campbell Albatrosses reach African waters gives birders yet another vagrant albatross to search for. With the possible split of Buller's Albatross still pending, it means that all of the currently recognised species of *Thalassarche* mollymawks have now been recorded from African waters.

PETER RYAN