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# *divide & rule*

## CONFUSING TIMES FOR SEABIRDERS

The North Atlantic is not renowned for its diversity of pelagic seabirds. It is the only ocean basin that doesn't have any albatrosses, although this wasn't always the case. Short-tailed Albatrosses, currently confined to the North Pacific Ocean, used to breed on Bermuda. Their demise there has been attributed to sea level rise some 400 000 years ago. Until recently, relatively few petrel species were recognised in the North Atlantic, but this has changed thanks to a plethora of splitting.

The trend started when the small populations of *Pterodroma* petrels breeding in the north-eastern Atlantic were split from the widespread southern Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis*. Initially two forms were recognised: Fea's Petrel *P. feae* and the critically endangered Zino's Petrel *P. madeira*. But now there is a call to split the small population of Fea's Petrels breeding on Bugio, one of the Desertas Islands off Madeira, from the bulk of the species breeding on the Cape Verde Islands, and name it Desertas Petrel *P. desertas*. If accepted, this will further complicate the identification of these birds at sea.

The small black-and-white shearwaters make up another confusing group. A comprehensive review using genetic information has demonstrated that the two widespread, traditionally recognised species, Audubon's *Puffinus lherminieri* and Little shearwaters *P. assimilis*, are not natural groups. Populations within ocean basins tend to be more closely related than are far-flung populations with similar structure and plumage. This confined Audubon's Shearwater to the North Atlantic, separating it from shearwaters from tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific Ocean. But once again the populations from the north-eastern Atlantic pose problems – should we consider them as subspecies of their Caribbean relatives or as distinct species?

Recent research by Storrs Olson supports specific recognition for the dark-vented Boyd's Shearwater *P. boydi* from the Cape Verdes and, by extension, the white-vented Macaronesian Shearwater *P. baroli* from the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands. Examining fossil and sub-fossil remains from Bermuda, Olson found that the huge numbers of shearwaters that occurred on Bermuda for at least a million years until the island was colonised by humans were Boyd's Shearwaters. Audubon's Shearwaters attempted to colonise Bermuda only after the disappearance of Boyd's Shearwaters, which points to the two being good species. This is not just an academic debate. Olson's results suggest that calls to foster a population of Audubon's Shearwaters on Bermuda may be misguided and that restoration efforts should rather focus on reintroducing Boyd's Shearwaters.

Other splits have been proposed that have consequences for birders further afield. Recognition of Atlantic (*Calonectris borealis*) and Mediterranean (*C. diomedea*) Cory's Shearwaters has been debated for some time, and now there are calls to split Mediterranean Storm-Petrel *Hydrobates melitensis* from European Storm-Petrel *H. pelagicus*. Some Mediterranean birds reach the north-eastern Atlantic, but how far south they range is unknown

But most confusing is the restructuring of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma castro*. Recent work has shown that discrete winter- and summer-breeding populations co-occur at many islands where this species breeds. The winter-breeding form, tentatively named Grant's Storm-Petrel *O. granti* is on average larger, with longer, narrower wings, a narrow white rump and barely forked tail. Summer-breeding forms are split into three species in the north-eastern Atlantic alone: Monteiro's Storm-Petrel *O. monteiroi* (Azores), Cape Verde Storm-Petrel *O. jabejabe* (Cape Verdes) and Madeiran Storm-Petrel *O. castro* (Madeira and the Canaries). Quite where this leaves the populations on Ascension and St Helena is unclear, although both summer- and winter-breeding forms have been reported from St Helena. Separation of these various forms at sea is unlikely. It's ironic that as southern Africa celebrates its first record of a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, we have no idea which species it was!

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**Above** *A European Storm-Petrel showing its distinctive white underwing flash. If the Mediterranean population is split, identification at sea will probably be impossible.*

**Top** *Band-rumped Storm-Petrels have genetically distinct populations at several islands that differ in the timing of breeding. There are a number of summer-breeding forms that are almost indistinguishable in flight.*