

“Soft-plumaged” Petrel at Dungeness: a new species for Britain

Carol and Tim Inskipp

At Dungeness on 15th October 1983 the wind was exceptionally strong, increasing from SW force 6-7 at 07h00 to WSW 10 at 12h00 and S 10-11 at 18h00. There was complete cloud cover throughout the day. There were few birds visible anywhere that day so, in the early afternoon, I went to attempt a seawatch from the relative shelter of the fishing boats on the east side of the point. It was very cold and virtually no birds were moving in the excessively windy conditions.

After an hour only a handful of Northern Gannets *Morus bassanus* had passed but, soon afterwards, I picked up a bird approaching from the east. At a distance I thought it was a Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* because it had dark upperparts, pale underparts and a shearing flight. However, as it came closer the shape and flight looked wrong for Manx and I could see that it had a dark underwing. I started to think that it was probably a skua *Stercorarius* but as it came past me, at its closest at about 300 m, I realised it was an unfamiliar *procellariid*. In shape it was rather similar to a Manx but with narrower, slightly angled wings, a longish thin pointed tail and a rather blunt head. Although I could not make out any details of the bill it seemed more obvious than the bill of Manx would at that range. The upperparts, including the tail and upperside of the wings appeared to be more or less uniformly dark, not as black as a Manx but not brown like a Balearic Shearwater *P. mauretanicus*. The dark extended below the eyes on the head but was not as clear-cut as on a Manx, merging with the pale on the throat. The underparts from chin to vent appeared whitish, not as pure as on Manx, and the undertail area was dirty-looking, but not forming a clear cut dark area. The underwing, including the axillaries, was dark, perhaps slightly paler on the central wing-coverts. The flight was very distinctive, with some shearing like Manx but a lot more tacking from side to side and occasionally climbing with a direct flight and fast rather shallow wing-beats with the wings angled back - rather reminiscent of a Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* hawking for flying ants; this made it appear a bit wader-like. It continued flying west until lost to view around the point. Its size was difficult to assess but it was much larger than a European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, seen very briefly alongside, and with a bigger wingspan and slightly longer body than a Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*.

I was sure from my limited knowledge that it was a *Pterodroma* petrel, but which one? On returning home I found that the literature available then was very limited, lacked detail and was to some extent inaccurate. Reference to Harrison (1983) narrowed it down to six species of petrels with dark, or mainly dark, underwings: Phoenix Petrel *P. alba*, Schlegel's (Atlantic) Petrel *P. incerta*, Tahiti Petrel *P. rostrata*, White-headed Petrel *P. lessonii*, Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea* and Soft-plumaged Petrel *P. mollis*. However, the first three of these would show an obvious dark breast, White-headed would have an obvious white head and Grey Petrel (and Schlegel's) would have dark under tail-coverts.

Coincidentally, in the same year Bourne (1983) recommended treating Soft-plumaged Petrel as three separate species; the two splits are now generally known as Fea's *P. feae* and Zino's Petrels *P. madeira*. Identification of these three species was discussed (e.g. Enticott 1991, Tove 1997) and gradually clarified over the years, culminating in Harrop (2004), who established that identifying Soft-plumaged Petrel was relatively easy but field separation of Fea's and Zino's could only be achieved by detailed observation of the bill structure.

The first British record, from Cornwall in 1989, was published as Soft-plumaged Petrel (BOURC 1992) and it wasn't until sometime later (Rogers *et al.* 1998) that the records were narrowed down to Zino's/Fea's Petrels. I had not submitted my record because I did not think that it was likely to be accepted, given the rather distant view that I had. However, Enticott (1999) published an account of the first Irish record from 1974, which had retrospectively been accepted based on details that were not too different from my own sighting. I submitted my record and it was accepted as the first British Zino's/Fea's Petrel (Rogers *et al.* 2004). Very recently a bird seen c. 60 miles SW of Scilly in 2001 has been accepted as the first specifically identified Fea's Petrel (BOU online: <http://www.bou.org.uk/recnews05.html>, 15 September 2005).

References

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