

NSW ORAC CASES DECIDED IN 2021

| | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| 769 | Soft-plumaged Petrel | off Port Stephens | September 13, 2020 | Accepted |
| 770 | Red-footed Booby | Shoal Bay | April 24, 2019 | Accepted |
| 771 | Little Stint | Farquhar Inlet | Dec 1 – 12, 2018 | Accepted |
| 772 | Fairy Tern | Quibray Bay, Kurnell | October 17, 2020 | Accepted |
| 773 | Black-winged Petrel | off Green Cape | November 29, 2009 | Accepted |
| 774 | Great Frigatebird | Lord Howe Island | March 16, 2021 | Accepted |
| 775 | South Polar Skua | Kurnell Peninsula | March 31, 2021 | Accepted |
| 782 | Southern Fulmar | Magic Pt, Maroubra | May 30, 2021 | Accepted |
| 783 | Light-mantled Albatross | Lord Howe Island | May 23, 2021 | Accepted |
| 784 | Scarlet-chested Parrot | near Tibooburra | July 2, 2021 | Not Accepted |

OVERVIEW

NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (NSW ORAC) reviewed a total of 10 cases in calendar year 2021 with 9 cases being accepted and one which was not accepted. This is the fewest annual number of cases to come before the committee in the past five years, no doubt a reflection of the reduction of the number of birders in the field due to COVID-19 restrictions. There were no really outstanding rarities submitted to the committee but the Little Stint at Farquhar Inlet in December 2018 (Case 771) was an extremely interesting case in that the bird was in full alternate plumage some 4 or 5 months later in the year that would normally be expected for a *Calidris wader*. Several experts were asked for their analysis of the bird and the consensus was that it had missed migration back to the northern hemisphere in February/March 2018 which had disrupted its internal clock resulting in pre-alternate moult continuing through the austral winter. The full decision document is shown below.

CASE SUMMARIES

Case 769: A Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis* was well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip out of Port Stephens on September 13, 2020. The bird was well seen down to a range of 10 metres and the excellent photographs together with a good detailed description allowed the identification to be confirmed. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the 14th accepted record for NSW and the first since a sighting off Sydney on June 8, 2019 (NSW ORAC Case 737). Mick Roderick

Case 770: A Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* was well seen and photographed whilst perched on the rigging of a boat at Shoal Bay within Port Stephens on April 14, 2019. The bird was seen at close

range for almost two hours and many diagnostic photographs were obtained. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the 15th confirmed record of Red-footed Booby in NSW and the 12th to have been accepted by NSW ORAC. Renee Davies

Case 771: A Little Stint *Calidris minuta* was well seen and photographed at Farquhar Inlet, Old Bar by the author and many observers from December 1, 2018 until at least December 10, 2018. Due to the great interest that this bird generated in the birding community, the complete decision document is reproduced here:

This submission details the observation of a Little Stint in full or 'definitive' alternate plumage at Farquhar Inlet, Old Bar on December 1, 2018. The bird was well seen and photographed by the author and by many more visiting birders during the next few days – the last posting on eBird was on December 10, 2018. Because of the strange phenomenon of the bird being in full alternate plumage in December, some 4 or 5 months later in the year than would normally be expected for a *Calidris* wader, a very extensive debate as to its identification took place between knowledgeable shorebird experts on Facebook. Some made a case for the bird being a Red-necked Stint rather than a Little Stint but these assertions were dependent on where the bird was believed to be in its moult cycle. The author did not attempt to make a submission based on his interpretation of the Facebook discussions but, instead, obtained detailed analyses and opinions as to the bird's identity from Dave Bakewell, Colin Rogers, David James and Danny Rogers and included these analyses with his submission.

Dave Bakewell, David James and Danny Rogers each made a strong case for the bird to be a Little Stint based on the moult pattern, the white chin and throat, the clear streaking on the sides of the face and the burnt orange colouration rather than the rosy appearance of RNST. Danny Rogers presented a very well reasoned hypothesis regarding the bird being in full alternate plumage in December suggesting that the bird had missed migration to the northern hemisphere due to misadventure in Feb-March 2018 and that the failure to migrate had disrupted its internal clock resulting in the pre-alternate moult continuing through the austral winter.

All but one committee member took the view that the moult patterns and structure of the bird were shown by Dave Bakewell, David James and Danny Rogers to be consistent with a Little Stint in full alternate plumage although the reasons for this plumage to occur in December can only remain conjecture. The other committee member voted for non acceptance based on the differing expert opinions and lack of publications addressing the specific points of disagreement. The committee therefore voted by majority to accept this record and it becomes the 2nd confirmed record for NSW, the first being at Tullakool Saltworks on November 23, 1987. There was a published report of Little Stint at Comerong Island on April 7, 1984 (prior to the formation of NSW ORAC) which was generally accepted as a confirmed record.

The committee would like to thank Liam for taking the time to prepare this submission and to express their appreciation for the detailed opinions and analyses prepared by Dave Bakewell, Colin Rogers, David James and Danny Rogers.

Submitted by Liam Murphy

Case 772: A Fairy Tern *Sternula nereis* was well seen and photographed on an exposed sandbank at Quibray Bay, Kurnell Peninsula on October 17, 2020. The bird had a black bill tip which led to some conjecture that it could have been the ssp *exsul* which breeds in New Caledonia and some of the outer Australian islands in the Coral Sea. However, one committee member supplied a photograph of a breeding Fairy Tern with a black bill tip in Lake Conjola which casts some doubt on this being a unique feature of the northern subspecies. The committee accepted this record unanimously and it should be noted that the NSW ORAC Review List has now been amended to review this species only from Sydney Harbour northwards as a result of the regular sightings from Botany Bay. David Sinnott

Case 773: A Black-winged Petrel *Pterodroma nigripennis* was well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip out of Eden on November 29, 2009. The thorough description and diagnostic photographs left no doubt as to the identification and the committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance. This is the fourth case to come before the committee since the species was reinstated onto the Review List in January 2018 and the fifth report since 2000. The committee thanked the author for taking the time to prepare the submission for this historic record. Graham Barwell

Case 774: A Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* was well seen and photographed at the southern end of Middle Beach, Lord Howe Island on March 16, 2021. Committee member David James who is noted for his knowledge of frigatebird identification wrote the following in his appraisal of this case:

The photos show a first cycle frigatebird. The whitish head, solid black chest band and white belly patch indicate juvenile plumage. I can see no evidence of moult from juvenile into the next plumage, but the cream rather than buff feathering of the head indicate that the plumage is slightly worn. In birds of this age the shape of the white belly patch and the axillary spurs are the most crucial identification features (James 2004). In this case the belly patch is roughly diamond-shaped, which is consistent with the typically oval-shaped patch of Great (i.e., within the observed variation of Great) and inconsistent with the triangular-shaped patch of Lesser. Short lateral spurs off the sides of the belly patch are confined to the belly and do not extend into the axillaries and underwing, which is consistent with Greater. The spurs of juvenile Lesser always extend from the front corners of the belly triangle well into the axillaries (James 2004).

Birds of this age cannot be reliably sexed by sight on current knowledge. Thus, this bird cannot be confirmed as a female.

The committee voted unanimously in favour of accepting this record and it becomes the 8th record of Great Frigatebird to be accepted by NSW ORAC although there are some viable reports which occurred prior to the inception of NSW ORAC. It is the first confirmed NSW record since January 2015 when a bird was seen around Nobby's Lighthouse, Newcastle. (NSW ORAC Case 638) Greg and Janice McKay

Case 775: A South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* was well seen and photographed in flight around the south eastern corner of the Kurnell Peninsula on March 31, 2021. Several good quality photographs were taken of the bird and a lot of debate as to the identification took place particularly between the submitter, Vincent Mourik, Jeff Davies and David James. The following is the appraisal text by David James, an acknowledged expert in skua identification:

This is definitely a South Polar Skua, but it is a very extraordinary record so close to the coast in eastern Australia. It is well established if not well known that the juvenile plumage of SPSK in all morphs is uniquely dull grey and plain (James in Higgins & Davies 1996; Malling Olsen & Larsson 1997; James 2011; Newell et al.; Menkhorst et al. 2017). This bird is cold steely grey, which only fits juv SPSK. The images may show some warmer brown tones on different platforms. The grey plumage does wear to a sort of salmon tone, and digital cameras tend to enhance that. The pointed rectrices indicate juv plumage. The short legs with no trail are good for SPSK (although it can seemingly vary a little in SPSK the feet always trail in Brown Skua). The strong contrast between the dark coverts and paler rectrices is classic of SPSK but not always diagnostic, but it is good here.

The committee accepted the record unanimously and it becomes the fourth record to be accepted by NSW ORAC since pale and intermediate morph South Polar Skuas were removed from the BARC Review List and added to the NSW ORAC Review List in August 2018 and it becomes the 14th confirmed record for NSW overall. David Sinnott

Case 782: A Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialoides* was well seen and photographed during a land-based sea watch at Magic Point, Maroubra on May 30, 2021. The bird circled in front of the shelter down to a range of about 500 metres, settling on the water briefly before taking off and disappearing to the south. The photographs clearly show a combination of pink bill plates and dark tips to the unguis, a combination which is unique to Southern Fulmar and the marking of the upperparts with the dark outer wing and narrow dark trailing edge was also diagnostic. A Southern Fulmar was reported from the same site the previous day but there is no way of knowing whether or not this bird was the same individual.

The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the 9th confirmed record to be accepted by NSW ORAC although there are doubtless a number of well substantiated reports that have not come before the committee. It is the first record of Southern Fulmar in NSW since a beach washed bird was found at Wreck Bay in June 2012 (NSW ORAC Case 553). Terry Percival, Roksana Boreli, Michael Kearns, Simon Gorta and Rob Hynson

Case 783: A Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata* was well seen and photographed at a location 6NM south east of Lord Howe Island on May 23, 2021. The photographs clearly showed that it was a Light-mantled Albatross in worn juvenile plumage and the committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance.

It becomes the 24th record of the species in NSW and the first since March 2017 when an individual was seen on a sea watch from North Head, Sydney (NSW ORAC Case 671). It is the second Lord Howe Island record to come before NSW ORAC with the previous one seen on July 20, 2004 (NSW ORAC Case 387). Jack Shick

Case 784: Two Scarlet-chested Parrots *Neophema splendida* were claimed to have been sighted at Cutting Creek on the Tibobourra to Cameron Corner track on July 2, 2021. . As with all reports where the birds have been seen very briefly and for which there are no photographs, this proved to be a difficult case for the committee to assess. As one committee member stated, "this is a case where the truth can never be proven absolutely" and, therefore, each member has to weigh the evidence presented and form an opinion as to the veracity of the sighting. In this instance, three committee members felt that there was sufficient evidence in the submission to warrant acceptance of the

sighting. However, five members voted for non acceptance based on a number of factors. These factors included the first sighting being from a moving vehicle, the second (in flight) sighting being very brief, the fact that the habitat is not 'correct', and the fact that the observers had only 90% confidence in the identification. One member pointed out that the western NSW subspecies of Blue Bonnet (*ssp haematogaster*) has a bright red rectangular patch which extends from the belly to the lower chest and may have caused confusion with Scarlet-chested Parrot in the brief flight views.

Although it is possible that the observers did in fact see Scarlet-chested Parrots, a majority of the committee felt that there was insufficient evidence for this report to qualify as a confirmed record for such a rare and enigmatic species out of its known range and it was therefore not accepted. The committee thanks the observers for taking the time to prepare the submission.

UNCONFIRMED REPORTS

With an increasing number of reports of unusual or rare species being posted onto on-line and social media sites, NSW ORAC is concerned that some of these reports do not receive the level of scrutiny required to verify them as confirmed records. It was agreed by the committee members that NSW ORAC would attempt to gather more information from the authors of postings of species on the NSW ORAC Review List in the form of photographs and/or a submission. If, at the time of publishing this year-end summary, there were reports for which submissions had not been made to NSW ORAC or BARC for species on their Review Lists, NSW ORAC would publish the report as an unconfirmed sighting to clarify that it had not yet undergone a review by the relevant rarities committee. There are thirteen such reports which have been published on eBird, Eremaea and/or Facebook sites in 2021, and they are listed below.

Mottled Petrel was reported from the Kiama pelagic trip on January 3, 2021

Kentish Plover was reported from Farquhar Inlet, Old Bar on January 7, 2021

New Caledonian/Coral Sea Storm Petrel was reported from the Port Stephens pelagic trip on January 17, 2021

Roseate Tern was reported from Cathie Creek estuary on March 12, 2021

New Caledonian/Coral Sea Storm Petrel was reported from the Port Stephens pelagic trip on March 28, 2021

New Caledonian/Coral Sea Storm Petrel was reported from the South West Rocks pelagic trip on April 3, 2021

Southern Fulmar was reported from Long Reef on May 28, 2021

Southern Fulmar was reported from Magic Point, Maroubra on May 29, 2021

Eyrean Grasswren was reported from east of Cameron Corner on June 27, 2021

Roseate Tern was reported from Harrington on November 6, 2021

Spinifexbird was reported from Yantabulla, 150km NW of Bourke on November 9, 2021

Black-winged Petrel was reported from the Terrigal pelagic trip on December 10, 2021

Canada Goose was reported from Lord Howe Island on December 19, 2021

Roger McGovern

Secretary NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee

January 12, 2022