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FIRST RECORD OF A GREAT REED WARBLER ON THE PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDS

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Marion Island (S46°36' E37°57') is one of two islands, separated by 19 km, which form the Prince Edward Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. The islands are part of South Africa.

Great Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* are palearctic migrant birds that breed in most of continental Europe, northern Africa (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and western- to central Asia (Cramp 1992). Between August and September, they leave their breeding grounds and migrate (Urban *et al.* 1997) to sub-Saharan Africa, with most birds settling south of the equator (Cramp 1992). Most birds that migrate to southern Africa arrive between December and January (Herremans 1997) and return to their breeding grounds between February and April (Tyler 2000), where they arrive between April and May (Cramp 1992).

Between 6 and 13 June 2014, a Great Reed Warbler was observed and photographed on the north-eastern shore of Marion Island at Rockhopper Bay (S46°52.619' E37°51.568'). This is not only the first record of this species for the Prince Edward Islands, but also the southern-most record for this species. The bird was extremely



Fig 1 – The Great Reed Warbler that was sighted on the north-eastern shore of Marion Island perching. © Daniël Kotzé

skittish, but kept to the same approximate area along the rocky shore throughout the eight day period in which it was observed, in spite of prevailing stormy weather. No call was heard during the observations.

Since 1947 there had been 34 non-marine vagrant bird species



Fig 2 – The Great Reed Warbler which was observed on the north-eastern shore of Marion Island – in flight. © Daniël Kotze

reported at the Prince Edward Islands (Gartshore 1987; Oosthuizen *et al.* 2009; unpublished data). The only other warbler species to have been recorded on islands in the southern Indian Ocean, is the Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, which has been reported at both Marion (Gartshore 1987; Oosthuizen *et al.* 2009) and Kerguelen Islands (Ausilio and Zotier 1989).

It is likely that this individual Great Reed Warbler was undertaking a reverse migration from southern Africa back to its breeding grounds. Birds undertaking reverse migrations make up an unknown

proportion of the population of most migratory species and may have genetic abnormalities (Gilroy and Lees 2003). These abnormalities affect the bird's navigation systems, resulting in multi-directional and unnaturally long distance migrations. This individual made a non-stop journey of at least 1 769 km, which is the shortest distance between South Africa and Marion Island. This incident might, however, also be related to the absence of celestial cues (Åkesson *et al.* 2001), extreme weather or inexperience in the case of an immature bird.

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