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AT-SEA SIGHTINGS OF BANDED TRISTAN ALBATROSSES OFF THE WESTERN CAPE AND A REVIEW OF RECORDS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN WATERS

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The Tristan Albatross (*Diomedea dabbenena)* became widely recognized as a full species in 1998, when it was spit from the Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*) complex (Robertson and Nunn 1998). The Tristan Albatross is a breeding endemic to Gough and Inaccessible islands. It is listed as Critically Endangered (Birdlife International 2012), due to threats both at-sea, from fisheries bycatch, and on its breeding grounds, where the introduction of alien house mice (*Mus musculus*) has greatly affected breeding success (Wanless et al. 2009).

Tristan and Wandering albatrosses typically cannot be separated at sea, except for 'snowy' Wandering Albatrosses (Ryan 2000). This meant that until the advent of tracking technology, little was known of the Tristan Albatross' at-sea distribution and thus its susceptibility to fisheries bycatch. Satellite tracking of breeding and non-breeding birds from Gough Island has revealed considerable overlap of the Tristan Albatross foraging range with longline fisheries (Cuthbert et al. 2001, Reid et al. 2013). Reid et al. (2013) found that non-breeding Tristan Albatross range widely throughout the South Atlantic and southern Indian oceans. Non-breeding birds regularly occur in the south-east Atlantic and south-west Indian Oceans in South African waters during the austral winter, with some birds venturing much further east, as far as southern Australia (Reid et al. 2013). During the austral summer birds headed west of Gough Island and foraged in the south-west Atlantic Ocean off South America (Reid et al. 2013).

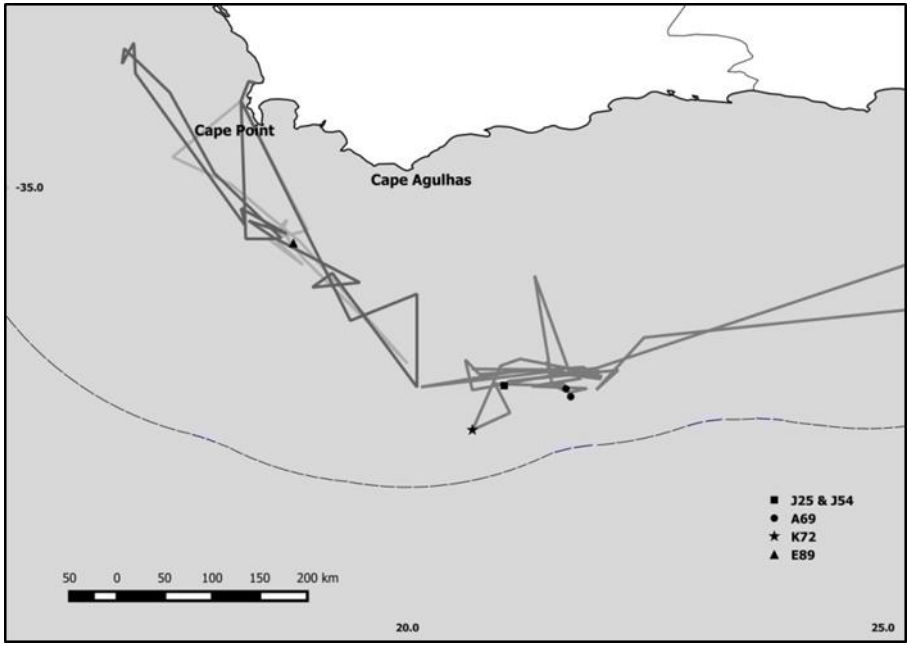

Fig. 1. Sightings of colour-banded Tristan Albatross off Western Cape, South Africa, July 2013 – Oct. 2014. Vessel paths – grey solid lines; South African Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – black dotted line.

The use of highly visible, coloured, alpha-numeric leg bands now allows observers to identify Tristan Albatrosses at sea. There are seven previous sightings of colour-banded Tristan Albatross from the southern African subregion; five off the west coast of South Africa or Namibia (Ryan et al. 2001, Hockey et al. 2005, Goren and Ryan 2010), a single dead bird from Port Elizabeth (Ryan et al. 2001) and a bird recorded as bycatch from a longline vessel operating off Durban (Cooper 2011).

Due to the difficulty in distinguishing Tristan and Wandering Albatrosses (Ryan 2000), it is likely that large numbers of Tristan Albatrosses (which are not banded) are overlooked in South African waters each year.

The current study reports on at-sea sightings of colour-banded Tristan Albatrosses in South African waters. All birds were observed opportunistically while conducting fisheries observer work onboard fishing vessels, operating off South Africa, between July 2013 and October 2014. Observer work included three fishing trips (South African vessels = 35 d, Jul – Oct 2014, Asian vessel = 37 d, Jul- Aug 2013) amounting to 72 days at sea off Cape Point or Cape Agulhas (Figure 1).

Diomedea albatrosses typically spend at least one year (sometimes several years) to recover condition after breeding; this is termed the sabbatical period (Wanless et al. 2009). I link my observations to resightings of the same individuals in their breeding colony at Gough Island, and infer whether the individuals were breeding, failed breeders or sabbatical birds, at the time I observed them.

Five individuals were identified by band number during this study (Figure 2). Four individuals were seen in July and August 2013 while onboard an Asian longline vessel, c. 250 – 300 km south of Cape Agulhas (Figure 1). One individual was observed in October 2014 c. 150 km south of Cape Point (Figure 1). All were seen at the stern of the vessel in multi-species assemblages while scavenging for bait and offal discards.

All of the individuals observed were adult males, aged 19- 35 years (Table 1). Four of the five birds had attempted to breed in the last 1-2 years, however all had failed (Bell, Jones and Dilley pers. comm.).

Fig. 2. One of the five Tristan Albatross identified by band number in this study. The bird pictured (J54) is an adult male Tristan Albatross seen approximately 250 km south of Cape Agulhas.

In the year each individual was sighted, 2 were failed breeders, 2 in their sabbatical period, and one bird's breeding status was unknown (Table 1). All individuals were resighted on Gough Island in Dec 2013/Jan 2014, with one bird (A69) attempting to breed, however failed again (June 2014). All the other birds were seen as loafers, and had not attempted to breed in early 2014. In Dec 2014 two individuals (E89 and J25) were loafing in the colony and two (A69 and K72) were on nests.

These sightings of failed breeders or adults in their sabbatical period off Cape Agulhas confirm the recent Global location sensor (GLS) logger data (Reid et al. 2013) that Tristan Albatrosses use the productive areas along the Agulhas Shelf to recover body condition after breeding. Overlap of Tristan Albatross foraging distribution with longline fisheries is of particular concern (Wanless et al. 2009), particularly off the Agulhas Bank and Cape Point where longline fisheries fishing effort is high (Petersen et al. 2009). Encouragingly, there have only been three reported Tristan Albatross mortalities from longline fisheries off South Africa from 1998 to 2014 (Petersen et al. 2009, Ryan unpublished data 2014). However Tristan Albatross bycatch from the high seas may go unreported or under-reported due to observers being unable to separate Tristan and Wandering albatrosses.

These sightings suggest that Tristan Albatrosses visit South African waters more regularly than previously thought. A number of suspected Tristan Albatrosses were seen while on these fishing vessels, however, their identification could not be confirmed, as they were not banded. Those unbanded birds were very similar in both plumage and size to the banded Tristan Albatrosses, alongside them, and appeared smaller than other *Diomedea* albatrosses, which I tentatively identify as Wandering Albatrosses. The Tristan Albatross is about 10% smaller than the Wandering Albatross. Observers at sea are encouraged to photograph any Wandering/Tristan Albatross and check for any colour bands.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Information on Tristan Albatrosses observed during this study.

Band ID (SAFRING no)	Sighting date	Sex	Year banded	Approximate age (years at time of sighting)	Previous breeding attempt
A69 (J04007)	26-28 Aug 2013	Male	1984 (chick)	29	Failed Apr 2013
E89 (J02195)	10 Oct 2014	Male	1983 (chick)	31	Unknown
J25 (J09445)	30 Jul 2013	Male	1994 (chick)	19	Successful 2009
J54 (J06030)	30 Jul 2013	Male	1988 (chick)	25	Failed Jun 2013
K72 (J00694)	15 Aug 2013	Male	1983 (adult)	35	Failed Sep 2012