

Status and Occurrence of Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland.

Introduction and Distribution

The Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*) is a small species of seabird that breeds from October to April with the majority of the world's population on Little Barrier Island, and a small population on Codfish Island, off Stewart Island, located off New Zealand (Onley and Scofield 2007). This species breeds from October to April (Howell *et al.* 1996) with most birds sitting on their eggs from October to December (Onley and Scofield 2007). During the breeding season, the majority of the population forages in the subtropical waters off New Zealand and the waters in the Tasmania Sea (Onley and Scofield 2007). Nonbreeding birds occur mostly from April to November in the Peru Current, California Current and the North Pacific Convergence (Roberson and Bailey 1991b, Spear *et al.* 1992). When the breeding season is finished, the Cook's Petrel migrates to the north Pacific to at least 34°N of Hawaii, and to 46°N off the Aleutian Islands (Onley and Scofield 2007). In the eastern Pacific, it occurs between Baja California and Chile with this species appearing most numerous off Peru (Onley and Scofield 2007).

Along the west coast of North America, the Cook's Petrel is a species that occurs only regularly well off the California coast (Spear *et al.* 1992). Determining the status of Cook's Petrel off the west coast of California was problematic until field identification was worked out by 1985 (Roberson and Bailey 1991a, Roberson and Bailey 1991b, Spear *et al.* 1992, Howell *et al.* 1996). Since that time there are over 111 accepted records of Cook's Petrel for California by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Most records come from offshore pelagic waters but, incredibly, there are multiple inland records from the Salton Sea (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Most records of Cook's Petrel have occurred between mid-May and early December with a distinct peak of records in August (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, there are only 2 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington, there is only 1 accepted record of Cook's Petrel by the Washington Bird Records Committee of a beached specimen recovered on December 15, 1995 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, there are only a couple of provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). In Alaska, there are only 2 accepted records of single birds: one found off Adak Island in August 1933; and one found off Agattu Island in July 1983, off the Outer Aleutian Islands (West 2008, Gibson *et al.* 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Cook's Petrel is covered in all standard North American Field Guides. This is a small species measuring 33 cm in length with a wingspan of 76 cm, and weighing 190 grams (Sibley 2000). This species like other gadfly petrels is normally found well offshore in deep pelagic waters where they can be encountered on their own or in very large numbers

(Onley and Scofield 2007). The Cook's Petrel has long narrow swept back wings and an erratic flight style, flying in high arcs with short bursts of rapid wingbeats (Onley and Scofield 2007). This species is seldom seen and is part of the difficult to identify family of pelagic seabirds called "*Pterodromas*" (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). For a more in depth summary on identification, pitfalls in identification and similar looking species, it is highly recommended that keen observers read Roberson and Bailey (1991), Spear *et al.* (1992), Howell (1996), Howell *et al.* (1996), and Onley and Scofield (2007).

Adult birds are almost pure white underneath with just a faint, thin black line along the trailing edge of the wing and at the primary tips with a small black "tick" mark at the carpal (Onley and Scofield 2007). The crown and nape are pale gray with no gray extending onto the sides of the neck (Onley and Scofield 2007). There is no collar (Onley and Scofield 2007). There is a small dark eye-patch and small dark bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The upper surface of the wing has a distinct dark M that cuts across the rump (Sibley 2000). The inner secondary area of the wings is gray (Onley and Scofield 2007). The tail is gray overall, but the lower part of the tail is darker with white outer tail feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Overall, adult birds look the same in fresh plumage except the dark M on the upperwing is more conspicuous (Onley and Scofield 2007).

In more worn plumage in adult birds the head is darker than the back, and the wings are overall much darker making the M less conspicuous (Sibley 2000). The underparts are the same as on fresh-plumaged birds (Onley and Scofield 2007).

Juvenile birds in fresh plumage are very pale with white fringes to the feathers on the upperparts (Onley and Scofield 2007). The underparts are the same as on adult birds (Onley and Scofield 2007).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Cook's Petrel is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 3 provincial records. The first record for British Columbia involved a single bird recorded aboard a research vessel well off the Queen Charlotte Islands at coordinates 52.40°N, 137.94°W on October 6, 2002 (Kenyon *et al.* 2009). The second record for the province was found by Chris Colbourne after the bird hit his front door and was later (that night) photographed by Ian Routley after a huge windstorm in the interior of British Columbia in Lillooet on December 4, 2007 (Cecile 2008a, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Unfortunately this bird later died at a nearby rehabilitation centre (I. Routley Pers. Comm.). The third record for the British Columbia was found at the Sheringham Lighthouse by Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland while conducting a sea watch that had

northwesterly winds well over 45 Knots on March 7, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The bird was seen from the lighthouse in telescopes as the observers were watching Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) that were as close as 5m from shore (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The Cook's Petrel was observed at about 50-100m from shore giving full underside and upperside views (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The bird was carried along the wind and never tried to turn so as a result headed due east along the shoreline towards Sooke (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The flight style was incredible to watch as the bird would fly erratically making sudden sharp changes in direction then a large sharp, steep arc straight up and then down, repeating this action over and over; and not once flapping or gliding on its long swept wings (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). There is also a tantalizing record of 2 birds, not identified to species, but called "Cookilarias" petrels that were observed by Louis Haviland on the morning of November 5, 2011, from the Sheringham Lighthouse (L. Haviland Pers. Obs.). These birds were seen flying west and out of the Juan de Fuca Strait after a huge northwesterly storm from the night before with winds clocked at over 40 Knots (L. Haviland Pers. Obs.). Also seen with the 2 "Cookilarias" petrels that morning were dozens of Northern Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and dozens of dark shearwaters that were either Sooty Shearwaters (*Puffinus griseus*) or Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) that were fairly close to shore (L. Haviland Pers. Obs.).

There are not enough records in British Columbia yet to formulate an occurrence pattern. In California where there is a pattern of occurrence, the Cook's Petrel occurs from mid-May until early December with a distinct peak occurring in August (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Though most records along the west coast have been found in the deep pelagic zone that is found far offshore, this species has occurred close to shore and inland a few times and, therefore, should always be watched for on future pelagic trips off British Columbia.



Figure 1: Record #2: Cook's Petrel found after hitting window in Lillooet on December 4, 2007.
Photo © Ian Routley.



Figure 2: Record #2: Cook's Petrel found after hitting window in Lillooet on December 4, 2007.
Photo © Ian Routley.



Figure 3: Record #2: Cook's Petrel found after hitting window in Lillooet on December 4, 2007. Photo © Ian Routley.

Table 1: Records of Cook's Petrel for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult October 6, 2002: well off QCI (52.40°N, 137.94°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 2.(1) adult [heavily worn] December 4, 2007: Chris Colbourne (photo: specimen) found after hitting window, Lillooet (Cecile 2008a)
- 3.(1) adult March 7, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

"Cookilarias" Petrels not to species

- 1.(2) adults November 5, 2011: Louis Haviland: Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley (L. Haviland Pers. Comm.)

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