

Gould's Petrel

Pterodroma leucoptera

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Gould's Petrel, photographed during a January 2016 Port Stephens pelagic trip
(photo: Mick Roderick)

This is a small black and white seabird, with grey upperparts, which almost exclusively forages at and beyond the continental shelf. Hence it is not readily seen except during pelagic excursions. However, in summer birds are seen regularly in small numbers during such trips. It is the most common of the "Cookilaria" type gadfly-petrels occurring in our waters.

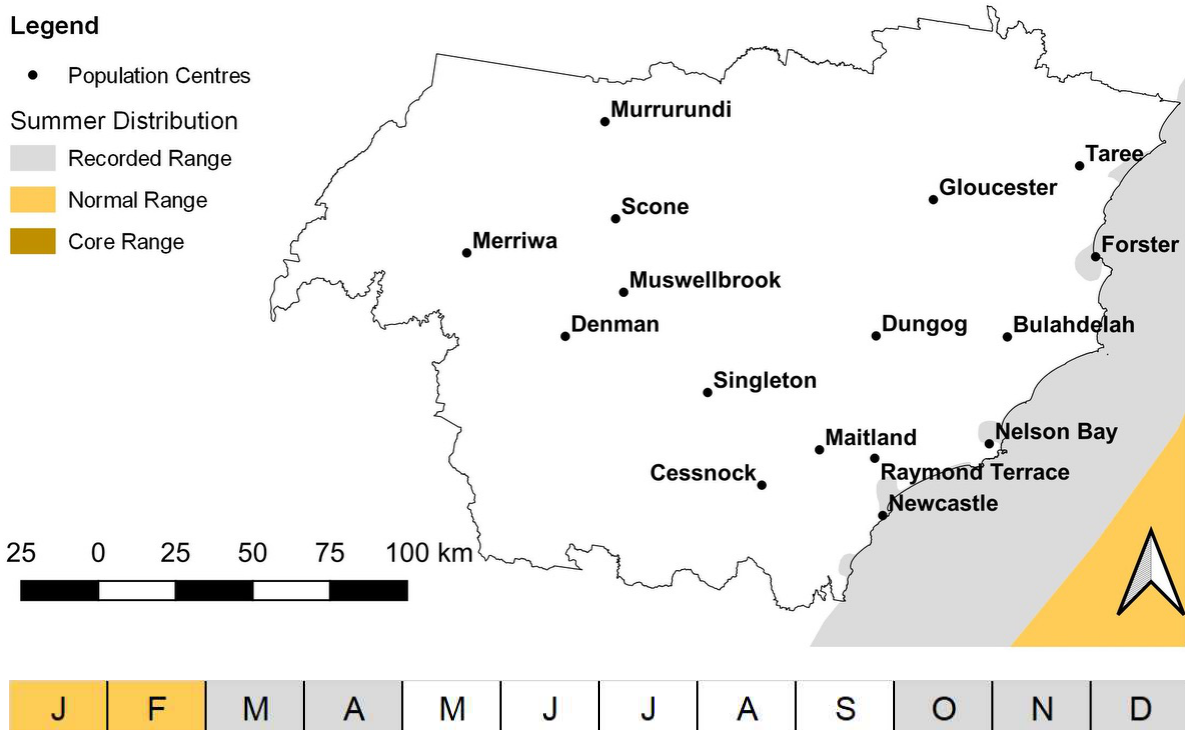
A key reason for choosing the Gould's Petrel as this month's featured bird is that it breeds locally, and right now many hundreds of males are sitting on eggs on islands somewhere off Port Stephens. After the egg is laid, males incubate for an extended period before being relieved by their mate. The egg hatches in late January or early February, and the chick fledges in May (long

after its parents have departed). The abandoned chick weighs about 30% more than an adult bird, so it has plenty of fuel reserves.

Regional Status

For a long time, the only known breeding site for the Australian sub-species of Gould's Petrel was on Cabbage Tree Island off Port Stephens. Thus the Hunter Region was very special for it. However, the breeding range has expanded (see below) including some birds now breed on Montague Island off Narooma. So, we no longer have our own endemic sub-species.

Most of our records of birds at sea are from the summer months but sightings can occur at any time between October and mid-April. In winter, birds are foraging in the tropics.



Distribution map and timeline for Gould's Petrel (map and timeline prepared by Dan Williams)

Ups and downs of a sub-species

The Cabbage Tree Island colony has been there for a very long time, and probably was fairly stable for most of its existence. However, in World War Two, the island at one stage was being used for bombing practice – until the RAOU (a precursor to BirdLife Australia) found out and quickly intervened!

The arrival of predators (such as Pied Currawongs) and other ecological

problems on the island caused the colony to slowly decline. By the early 1990s, there were only 100-150 pairs, and which were experiencing poor breeding success. A NPWS recovery project was initiated, which led to there being more than 1,000 pairs by the mid-2000s and with around 60% breeding success rate. However, ten years later, the Cabbage Tree birds were having much poorer breeding success (down to less than 20% in 2015/16). This problem occurred in three successive seasons and was thought to be mainly (but perhaps not entirely) due to off-island factors. The results for recent years have been better.

Having just the one breeding site put the birds at risk from stochastic events. However, in 1995 a small satellite colony was discovered on nearby Boondelbah Island. Subsequently, artificial nest boxes were installed on Boondelbah; then, in both 1999 and 2000, 100 chicks each year were transferred from Cabbage Tree shortly before they fledged. This consolidated the second colony, where many pairs now breed annually.

More recently, birds have also been found breeding on Broughton Island (where a small number of nest boxes have since been installed using funds raised in a Twitchathon) and Little Broughton Island. And, in October 2012, a pair of Gould's Petrels was discovered on Montague Island. That pair successfully raised chicks annually from 2013 to 2016, and there are several additional pairs now breeding regularly on Montague. The number of breeding pairs on Montague varies quite a bit (as might be expected with a newly forming colony).

The Broughton, Little Broughton and Montague Island populations have only been discovered since the eradication of pests (such as rats and rabbits) was achieved on all offshore islands along the NSW coast. This is a remarkable conservation outcome.



Gould's Petrel, photographed during a January 2017 Port Stephens pelagic trip (photo: Dick Jenkin)

Sub-species

There are two sub-species – *leucoptera* (Australian Gould's Petrel) and the somewhat larger *caledonica* (New Caledonian Gould's Petrel). The latter breeds in two large colonies in steep forested valleys on the central mountain chain of New Caledonia (there is also a small colony on Raivavae in French Polynesia). Non-breeding birds of both sub-species forage in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, with minimal overlap of their feeding areas. However, in the breeding season both sub-species forage within the Tasman Sea and to the south of the Australian continent.

Some authorities regard the Collared Petrel (*P. brevipes*) as another subspecies of Gould's Petrel. Conversely, other authorities raise the New Caledonian petrel to full species status.

About the name

Gould's Petrel

Our bird honours the famed naturalist John Gould, the person who first described it scientifically. He named it as the White-winged Petrel – in 1978 the RAOU adopted the name now in use. The origin of *petrel* is obscure, although there is a known 1602 usage in English. The sailor William Dampier

wrote in 1703 that the name derived from the apostle Peter walking on water – clearly Dampier would have been referring to storm-petrels.

Pterodroma leucoptera

The genus name derives from the Greek words *pteron*, wing, and *dromas*, racing i.e. winged racer – a reference to the swift and skilful flying often exhibited by this guild of birds. The species name is from the Greek words *leukos*, white, and *pteron*, wing.



A Gould's Petrel chick, found in a monitored artificial nest box on Broughton Island in January 2020 (photo: Rob Kyte).

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide

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