

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross

Thalassarche carteri

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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An adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross off Port Stephens (photo: Mick Roderick)

General Comments

Albatrosses are large birds but this is the smallest of its kind found anywhere in the world. Its wingspan (tip to tip) is almost 2 metres – that is slightly more than the height of an average male, but only about half the size of the wingspan of a Wandering Albatross. The bird's underparts are white, except for narrow black margins to the underwing. The back, upper wings and base of the tail are dark, and the bird has a white rump.

Adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses have a dark bill with a narrow yellow culmen stripe which grades into a pink or cream tip. The bill of young birds has a black tip and lacks the yellow culmen stripe, which develops slowly, passing through stages of brown and brownish-yellow before the full adult colour is achieved – the period over which this colour change occurs is uncertain but it does not begin until well into the second year. Juveniles also

differ from adults by having a smaller eye patch and light pink tarsus and feet (whereas the tarsus, feet and claws of adults are whitish).

Although the closely related Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross is an uncommon vagrant in Australian waters there were some records of one off the Central Coast in late 2024. The two species look very similar (and at one point were considered to be conspecific) but the Atlantic version has a greyish hood and its culmen stripe is slightly broader.



An Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross off Port Stephens showing its white rump (photo: Mick Roderick)



An Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross off Terrigal – note its grey hood (photo: Jeff Jones)

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses mainly breed on the French subantarctic island groups of Amsterdam, St Paul, Crozet, and Kerguelen Islands and on South Africa's Prince Edward Islands. Approximately 65% of the global population breeds on Amsterdam Island. The population has about halved – thought to be from a combination of deaths associated with long-line fishing and outbreaks of diseases (eg avian cholera) at the breeding grounds.

Regional Status

This is one of the most commonly recorded albatrosses in our region. The numbers can range from 1-2 birds up to 20-30 birds at times. Most records are from the May-August period but birds sometimes begin arriving in early autumn and records through into late spring are not unusual.

About the name

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross

The origins of “albatross” are intriguing – and they have nothing to do with shades of white (which is *alba* in Latin). In old Portuguese, a term for a water-lifting device was *alcatruz* – this name was then given to pelicans in the mistaken belief that they carried water for their young in their bills. The name was later extended to the frigatebirds (presumably because they have a somewhat similar bill shape), and thence to the albatrosses (initially, as *alगतross*).

The adults of our birds have a distinctive yellow stripe on the top of their bill. John Gould therefore named it as the Yellow-billed Albatross but that name didn't stick. Originally there would be considered to be two subspecies, inhabiting the Indo-Pacific and Atlantic Oceans respectively. Now they are treated as two different species.

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The genus name derives from the Greek words *thalassa*, the sea, and *arkhos*, ruler – calling an albatross the ruler of the sea seems very apt! The species name honours Thomas Carter, an English ornithologist who was active in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.



A juvenile Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross (photo: Allan Richardson)

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 BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlasers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • 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 • James Jobling (2010). The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Names. Christopher Helm, London • Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels – www.acap.aq