

NSW ORAC CASES DECIDED IN 2023

813	Roseate Tern	Kingscliff	March 31, 2017	Accepted
814	Mottled Petrel	S. of Coffs Harbour	December 5, 2022	Accepted
815	Asian Dowitcher	Stockton Sandspit	November 25, 2022	Accepted
823	Barn Swallow	Bogangar	January 30, 2023	Accepted
824	Black-winged Petrel	off Port Stephens	January 22, 2023	Accepted
825	Eyrean Grasswren	Sturt NP	July 29, 2022	Accepted
826	Mottled Petrel	off Kiama	January 2, 2021	Accepted
827	Black-winged Petrel	Britannia Seamount	March 26, 2023	Accepted
828	White-bellied Storm Petrel	Britannia Seamount	March 26, 2023	Accepted
829	Bridled Tern	off Ballina	February 26, 2023	Not Accepted
831	Slaty-backed Thornbill	Gundabooka NP	June 14-15, 2023	Accepted

OVERVIEW

NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (NSW ORAC) reviewed a total of 11 cases in calendar year 2023 with 10 cases being accepted and one which was not accepted. This represents a fairly quiet year of activity for the committee but, having said that, there were some noteworthy cases reviewed during the year.

Probably the most exciting event of 2023 was the discovery of a population of Slaty-backed Thornbills in Gundabooka NP by Tobias Hayashi and Julian Robinson on June 14 and 15, 2023 which, having been accepted by NSW ORAC, become the first record for this species in NSW. There have been several more reports of the species from this site in the months following the initial discovery and it would be interesting to know whether this population of Slaty-backed Thornbills has been overlooked by birders in the past or whether their range is moving south due to environmental or other factors.

Also of special note was the first confirmed record of Barn Swallow in NSW since March 1988. The bird was discovered at Bogangar on January 30, 2023 and remained until at least February 22, 2023. Also of significance was the fifth record of Asian Dowitcher for NSW and the first since a bird was seen at Shoalhaven Heads in November 2013. More Eyrean Grasswrens were reported from Sturt National Park and NSW ORAC will monitor future reports from the site to determine whether this may be a permanent resident population. With two more confirmed records of Black-winged Petrel from the NSW coast, it is probable that this species will soon be removed from the NSW ORAC Review List.

Probably the most significant BARC case for NSW was the acceptance of a record of Uniform Swiftlet seen at Wybung Head, Munmorah State Recreation Area on November 8, 2021 which was the first confirmed record of this species to be reviewed by BARC for Australia.

CASE SUMMARIES

Case 813: Two Roseate Terns *Sterna dougallii* were well seen and photographed at the Northern Breakwater, Kingscliff on March 31, 2017. The excellent submission and photographs left no doubt that these were Roseate Terns of the Australian breeding population *ssp gracilis*. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the fourth record to be accepted by NSW ORAC and, with three well documented records in the period prior to the formation of NSW ORAC, it becomes the seventh confirmed record for NSW. Kathy Wilk

Case 814: A dead beachcast Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata* was discovered on an ocean beach just north of Tuckers Rocks between Urunga and Coffs Harbour on December 5, 2022. The committee were happy to accept this bird as a Mottled Petrel based on the thick carpal bar, dusky chest and belly, and white undertail coverts which together eliminate any confusion species. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the 23rd confirmed record for NSW and the first since a beachcast bird was found near Port Kembla on April 5, 2019 (NSW ORAC Case 724). Phil Gilmour

Case 815: An Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* was discovered at Stockton Sandspit on November 25, 2022. The bird was subsequently seen and photographed by multiple observers until its last recorded sighting on January 5, 2023. There were no doubts as to the bird's identity and committee member David James made the following comments on its age and moult. "It is a first cycle bird in advanced moult. By mid-December it appeared to have replaced the inner primaries while the outer primary was a retained juvenile feather. Most of the secondary coverts, a few scapulars and the longest tertial were old juvenile, and most other feathers were new first winter (formative) plumage." The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes only the fifth record for NSW and the first since a bird was seen at Shoalhaven Heads on November 16, 2013 (NSW ORAC Case 603). Anders Balksten

Case 823: A Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* was well seen and photographed at 88 Hastings Road, Bogangar on January 30, 2023. The bird was subsequently seen and photographed by multiple observers until at least February 22, 2023. The submission and diagnostic photographs left no doubt as to the identification and the committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance. It becomes only the second record of Barn Swallow to be accepted by NSW ORAC with the previous record being from Shortlands Wetland Centre on March 12, 1988 (NSW ORAC Case 11). However, prior to the establishment of NSW ORAC, there were two well documented records of the species, the first at McGraths Hill STW in November 1981 and the other at Mullumbimby in December 1982 and this sighting therefore becomes the 4th confirmed record for NSW. Ruben Brinsmead

Case 824: A total of seven Black-winged Petrel *Pterodroma nigripennis* were well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip out of Port Stephens on January 22, 2023. With some birds photographed down to a range of just a few metres, the photographs and excellent description left

no doubt as to the identification and the committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance. This is the fourth case to be accepted by NSW ORAC since Black-winged Petrel was reinstated on the Review List in 2018 and, with pest control on Lord Howe Island improving the breeding success of the species, it is likely that it will be removed from the NSW ORAC Review List in the future. Jon Spicer-Bell

Case 825: Two Eyrean Grasswren *Amytornis goyderi* were sighted in Sturt National Park – Wild Desert Fence Training area on July 29, 2022. The birds provided good views down to a range of 30 metres over a period of about 50 minutes and several good quality photographs were obtained and included in the submission. The photographs clearly show the large finch-like bill, plain pale breast and lack of dark facial marks, all diagnostic features of Eyrean Grasswren. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and it becomes the third record of Eyrean Grasswren to be accepted by NSW ORAC and the first since a sighting at Winathee station in December 2021 (NSW ORAC Case 791). The following comments were made by Dick Cooper in his assessment of the case and provide further context to this record:

I draw attention to the fact that Eyrean Grasswrens were regularly reported during 2021-22 within the Wild Deserts project site, in Sturt NP, and that there is a 14 page AFO article by Hunt, Pedlar and West (<https://afo.birdlife.org.au/afo/index.php/afo/article/view/2279/2302>) on the frequency of occurrence of Eyrean Grasswrens in the Wild Deserts project site, which includes the Wild Training Zone = the Fence Training Area referred to in Case 825. The article refers to 36 separate observations between May 2021 and August 2022 within the entire project area (of which 11 were observed in the WTZ area). Thus the article suggests persistence for at least this 18 month period with the Case 825 reported observation date (29 July 2022) falling within the period covered in Hunt, Pedlar and West. The article also notes evidence of breeding.

We probably need to retain the Eyrean Grasswren on the ORAC list until it can be confirmed that these birds have firmly established themselves within NW NSW rather than an aberration arising from the recent extended period of high rainfall and the concomitant sustained ephemeral vegetation growth here during 2020– 2022. Jodi and Richard Webber

Case 826: A Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata* was well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip off Kiama on January 2, 2021. The diagnostic photographs together with the description and elimination of confusion species left no doubt at all as to the identification of this bird. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance of this record and it becomes the 25th confirmed record of Mottled Petrel in NSW and the first since the acceptance of a beachcast bird discovered at Tuckers Rocks on December 5, 2022 (NSW ORAC Case 814). Jodi and Richard Webber

Case 827: A Black-winged Petrel *Pterodroma nigripennis* was well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip to the Britannia Guyots on March 26, 2023. The description, the elimination of potential confusion species and the excellent diagnostic photographs confirmed the bird to be a Black-winged Petrel. The committee accepted this record unanimously and it becomes the fifth case to be accepted by NSW ORAC since Black-winged Petrel was reinstated on the Review List in January 2018. There have been only seven reports of this species off the NSW coast since 2000 and the last record to be accepted by NSW ORAC was off Port Stephens in January 2023 (NSW ORAC Case 824). With pest control on Lord Howe Island improving the breeding success of this species, it is likely that it will be removed from the NSW ORAC Review List in the future. Jodi Webber

Case 828: A White-bellied Storm Petrel *Fregetta grallaria* was well seen and photographed on a pelagic trip to the Britannia Guyots on March 26, 2023. The description, the elimination of potential confusion species and the excellent diagnostic photographs confirmed the bird to be a White-bellied Storm Petrel. The committee accepted this record unanimously and it becomes the first case to come before NSW ORAC since the species was removed from the BARC Review List in early 2023. Prior to this case, there had been eleven accepted records for NSW by BARC with the most recent being a record on the Britannia Seamount on March 26, 2021 (BARC Case 1178/NSW ORAC Case 779). There was also a single confirmed record accepted by NSW ORAC being a bird blown ashore at Yamba on May 23, 2006 (NSW ORAC Case 419). This record therefore becomes the thirteenth record accepted for NSW apart from Lord Howe Island. Jodi Webber

Case 829: Three Bridled Tern *Onychoprionanaethetus* were claimed to have been sighted from a cruise ship off Skennars Head, near Ballina, on February 26, 2023. The birds were observed for 3 to 5 minutes at a minimum range of 50 metres and five poor quality photographic images were included in the submission. Submissions with low resolution photographs and no description which clearly eliminates confusion species (in this case, Sooty Tern) are always difficult for the committee to assess and so it was in this case. Four of the eight committee members voted in favour of acceptance and four voted not to accept the report. The members voting against acceptance cited the lack of any attempt to separate Bridled from Sooty Terns by their whiter primary bases and supercilium extension, the reliance on the brown upperparts rather than the darker upperparts of a classic adult Sooty Tern and the fact that one of the birds in the photographs did not appear to be a juvenile Bridled or Sooty Tern but some other species. The committee therefore voted not to accept this report although most were prepared to accept that the birds could well have been Bridled Terns but that the evidence presented was not conclusive. There have been five records of Bridled Tern accepted by NSW ORAC historically with the most recent being seen in Newcastle on January 30, 2013 (NSW ORAC Case 576).

Case 831: Six Slaty-backed Thornbills *Acanthiza robustirostris* were seen at Gundabooka National Park, Dry Track Campground – four were seen on the Little Mountain Walk on June 14, 2023 and a further two were seen the next morning (June 15, 2023) in the campground area. High quality diagnostic photographs were obtained and included with the submission and, together with the comprehensive analysis of the plumage, structure and calls, there was no doubt as to the identification of the birds. The author meticulously eliminated adult and juvenile Chestnut-rumped Thornbill and Inland Thornbill as possible confusion species. The committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance of this record and it becomes the first record of Slaty-backed Thornbill in NSW and it should be noted that there have been several more reports of the species from this site in the months following the initial discovery. It would be interesting to know whether this population of Slaty-backed Thornbills has been overlooked by birders in the past or whether their range is moving south due to environmental or other factors. Tobias Hayashi

UNCONFIRMED REPORTS

With an increasing number of reports of unusual or rare species being posted onto on-line and social media sites, NSW ORAC is concerned that some of these reports do not receive the level of scrutiny required to verify them as confirmed records. It was agreed by the committee members that NSW

ORAC would attempt to gather more information from the authors of postings of species on the NSW ORAC Review List in the form of photographs and/or a submission. If, at the time of publishing this year-end summary, there were reports for which submissions had not been made to NSW ORAC or BARC for species on their Review Lists, NSW ORAC would publish the report as an unconfirmed sighting to clarify that it had not yet undergone a review by the relevant rarities committee. There are seven such reports which have been published on eBird, Eremaea and/or Facebook sites in 2023, and they are listed below.

South Polar Skua was reported off Wollongong on March 23, 1997

South Polar Skua was reported off Kiama on March 25, 2017

Roseate Tern was reported from Lake Cathie on March 13, 2021

Oriental Pratincole was reported from north of Wanganella on January 7, 2023

Roseate Tern was reported from Flat Rock, Ballina on January 30, 2023

Grey Wagtail was reported from Booligal on March 12, 2023

A beachcast Grey Phalarope was reported from Blackhead Beach in April 2023

Roger McGovern

Secretary NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee

January 11, 2024