

White-faced Storm-Petrel

Pelagodroma marina

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Hunter Bird
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A White-faced Storm-Petrel at the continental shelf off Port Stephens (Photo: Alan Stuart)

Outside of its breeding season, the White-faced Storm-Petrel is strictly pelagic. This, together with its often-remote breeding sites, makes it a difficult bird to see from the mainland although sometimes they get pushed closer to it by severe storms. However, they are regularly seen on pelagic seabirding trips in southern Australian waters, and sometimes are recorded as scores of birds.

Description

It is a mostly grey and white bird, small (by seabird standards) and with a generally dainty appearance. The belly and wing coverts are white, and the upperparts are light grey to dark grey, with a blackish tail. The face is white bordered with grey, and having a diagnostic dark eye-stripe.

In flight, the bird's legs project well beyond the tail and the wings are broad with a rounded leading edge. It has a gliding flight, broken by series of rapid wing beats. It feeds on planktonic food items which it picks from the ocean

surface as it bounds over it (using paired feet ie it is a bouncing motion not a walking motion).

Regional Status

The White-faced Storm-Petrel breeds in the Hunter Region, on islands of the Broughton Island Group (see below). Most non-breeding season records are from boat trips to the edge of the continental shelf, however there were records from around Newcastle in January 2013 and April 2015, including some of live birds, also there was a live bird on a beach in the Worimi Conservation Lands in March 2013 (taken into care) and a dead bird on a beach in Myall Lakes National Park in January 2003.



A bird at Stormpetrel Nature Reserve during a check of burrow occupancy (Photo: Suse Callaghan)

Breeding in the Hunter Region

Currently the two Broughton Island Group islands with breeding populations are Inner Rock and North Rock. Those two islands are managed together as the Stormpetrel Nature Reserve, for which there is no public access apart from occasional conservation and breeding success-related studies by NPWS staff. Around ten years ago, population estimates were of 151 pairs for North Rock and 63 pairs for Inner Rock (see Corella 2012). However, from the

occasional subsequent visits the number of burrows is thought to have decreased.

White-faced Storm-Petrels were recorded “in their thousands” on Broughton Island in 1911, but sadly they disappeared in the late 1950s, driven off the island by the introduction of the Black Rat (see Corella 2012). Although feral animals were removed from Broughton Island more than ten years ago, there is as yet no sign that storm-petrels are re-establishing.

Although breeding is a summer activity, birds were recorded on camera traps on Inner Rock and North Rock in July 2021. That is the earliest known return for the species (S. Callaghan pers. comm.).



A trail camera image of a bird at night returning to its burrow on North Rock (Photo: Suse Callaghan)

Sub-species

The taxonomy of White-faced Storm-petrel is complex and hasn't been studied in recent times. Six subspecies are currently recognised. The birds which breed on Australian islands are subspecies *dulciae* (Australian White-faced Storm-Petrel). Given the wide-ranging movements of foraging seabirds, it's conceivable that the New Zealand-breeding subspecies *maoriana* might sometimes forage in Australian waters and there have been reports of the rare Kermadec Island-breeding subspecies *albiclunis* off eastern Australia.

About the name

White-faced Storm-Petrel

“White-faced” is descriptive, while the genus name is an early example of fake news. For centuries, the various members from this guild of birds were considered by sailors to be harbingers of storms and sightings of them were held in dread. In fact, such sightings were a harbinger that those sailors had entered pelagic waters, where any storms encountered were more likely to be ferocious ones.

In the late 18th Century, “stormy petrel” entered English literature as a term for a person who delights in conflict or attracts controversy. This is a much-maligned guild of birds, and unfairly so!

Pelagodroma marina

The genus name means sea-racer and derives from the Greek terms *pelagos* (the sea) and *dromas* (racing). The species name also refers to the sea, from the Latin word *marinus*. Thus, sea sea-racer: it’s definitely a seabird! Currently there is only one species in this genus (i.e. it is monospecific).



A White-faced Storm-Petrel bouncing on the water as it forages (Photo: Alan Stuart)

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. Cooper et al. (2014). Atlas of birds of NSW and the ACT. • Personal communications from NPWS Ranger Susanne Callaghan.

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