

New South Wales Albatross Study Group 1972 Season

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A summary of last season's banding activities is given with some comments on the relative feeding attraction of Austinmer and Malabar, New South Wales. The 1972 retraps of Wandering Albatrosses *Diomedea exulans* are presented graphically and some interesting recoveries are mentioned. Condensed comments are made on the occurrence of other species observed while albatross banding since 1958.

Although the banding effort was sustained during the 1972 winter at both Malabar and Austinmer and a respectable sample of Wanderers was ultimately obtained, four factors operated to depress the total below that of the three previous years.

- The arrival of the main body of birds was at least three weeks later than usual though their departure was not similarly delayed.
- Bad weather, particularly in July, reduced the opportunities for banding.
- Lessening attraction of Malabar sewage out-fall for scavenging seabirds. Fatty wastes are now so well processed that banders there have resorted to the practice of baiting with lard to which they attribute much of last season's success, especially with Black-browed Albatrosses, *Diomedea melanophris*.
- There were less Wanderers available, for instance, than in 1970. Numbers do vary from year to year and the relative importance of the influencing factors is not known. Some of these factors are food availability (cuttlefish mortality), breeding success, local and general weather patterns and unknown cyclical effects.

Table 1 summarises the results from last winter from which it will be seen that 90 of the 236 individuals caught were retraps. This is 38 per cent overall but on further breakdown the usual phenomenon is seen whereby the retrap rate at Austinmer approaches twice that at Malabar (43% and 25%).

I believe that this discrepancy can be summarised by saying that precise journeys to natural food sources of long standing become

fixed in the regimen of experienced birds and are first discovered fortuitously or by following others. The Sydney area has no large cuttlefish but in the region of Austinmer/Bellambi an abundance of the world's largest cuttlefish species seasonally occurs. The presence of the albatrosses is synchronous with that of the cuttlefish and one is led to the conclusion that an apparent post-breeding mortality in the latter provides the sole reason for such a concentration of *exulans* and *melanophris* as happens at this time.

Artificial food sources of a less permanent nature and short history are found by chance and exploited, in this case by itinerant birds wandering beyond the traditional food source. As ship's garbage is seized upon by *exulans* wherever it is found, so with Malabar sewage. The locality is probably not important and is 'discovered' anew each year.

Dolphins are another primary predator on the cuttlefish but despite an earlier theory that they were important in making this food available to the albatrosses by killing more than they consumed, there is much evidence now to the contrary and it can be stated that any benefit to the birds is not significant.

Retraps

Figure 1 in which the results of both banding centres are combined, demonstrates some aspects of the composition of the 1972 retraps. It is fairly typical of previous years. Each vertical line represents the retrap history from its banding (top) to its capture in 1972 (base line).

Recoveries from Breeding Grounds

During 1972 a number of Wandering Albatrosses originally banded by the Group has been

reported from various breeding islands. Details of most of these have been recorded in Recovery Roundup.

Five (5) have been reported from Kerguelen Island.

One (1) has been reported from Possession Island, Crozet Archipelago.

Twenty three (23) have been reported from Bird Island, South Georgia.

The information on the last comes from a British Antarctic Survey expedition which expects to continue its study for another two seasons. The Bird Island Wanderers have been undisturbed by scientific parties since the summer of 1963-64.

Sighting in the Great Australian Bight

Only two Australian recoveries were reported, both from coastal New South Wales, but an interesting sighting was obtained in the Great Australian Bight. A marine engineer observed a wanderer with red dye marking on the head (as supplied at Austinmer) when southwest of Kangaroo Island on 1 September 1972. It followed the ship eastward for most of the day. The informant, Mr H. Beek, who has assisted the writer in banding Wanderers on several occasions, has no doubt that the bird was artificially marked in the manner adopted at Austinmer.

As the dye fades quickly and is hardly discernable after two weeks, it must have been dyed (and banded) on a trip which took place on 26 August 1972 and thus travelled at least 1750 km in six days.

Other Observations at Austinmer/Bellambi

Frequent banding excursions from the above centre over the last 14 years enable the following general comments to be made on several species encountered inshore between late June and mid September. Wandering and Black-browed Albatrosses and Giant Petrels occur, of course, over the whole period but the last are in very small numbers and are not seen on every trip.

Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora epomophora*: One only out of 2660 great albatrosses caught has been this species.

Yellow-nosed Albatross *D. chlororhynchos*: Observations of single birds in some years.

Shy Albatross *D. cauta cauta*: Single birds in some years.

Grey-backed Shy Albatross *D. cauta salvini*: Has not been observed before the last week in August, single birds in most years. One was banded in 1960.

Prions *Pachyptila* sp.: Up to a dozen on some occasions occurring over the whole period but more numerous in July. Fairy Prions *P. turtur* often identified.

TABLE I
Summary of Birds Caught

	Wandering Albatross		Total	Black-browed Albatross	Royal Albatross	Giant Petrel
	Austinmer	Malabar		Malabar		Malabar
Banded (previously unmarked birds)	97	47	144	8		8 ⁵
Retrapped (including repeat recoveries) ⁶	74 ¹	16 ²	90			
New Recoveries (originally banded elsewhere)	2 ³		2			
Banded at other N.S.W. location					1 ⁴	
Total Individuals Caught	173	63	236	8	1	8
Number of Outings	8	12	20			

1. Includes one bird previously banded at Possession Island, one previously banded at South Georgia and one banded at Malabar in the current season.

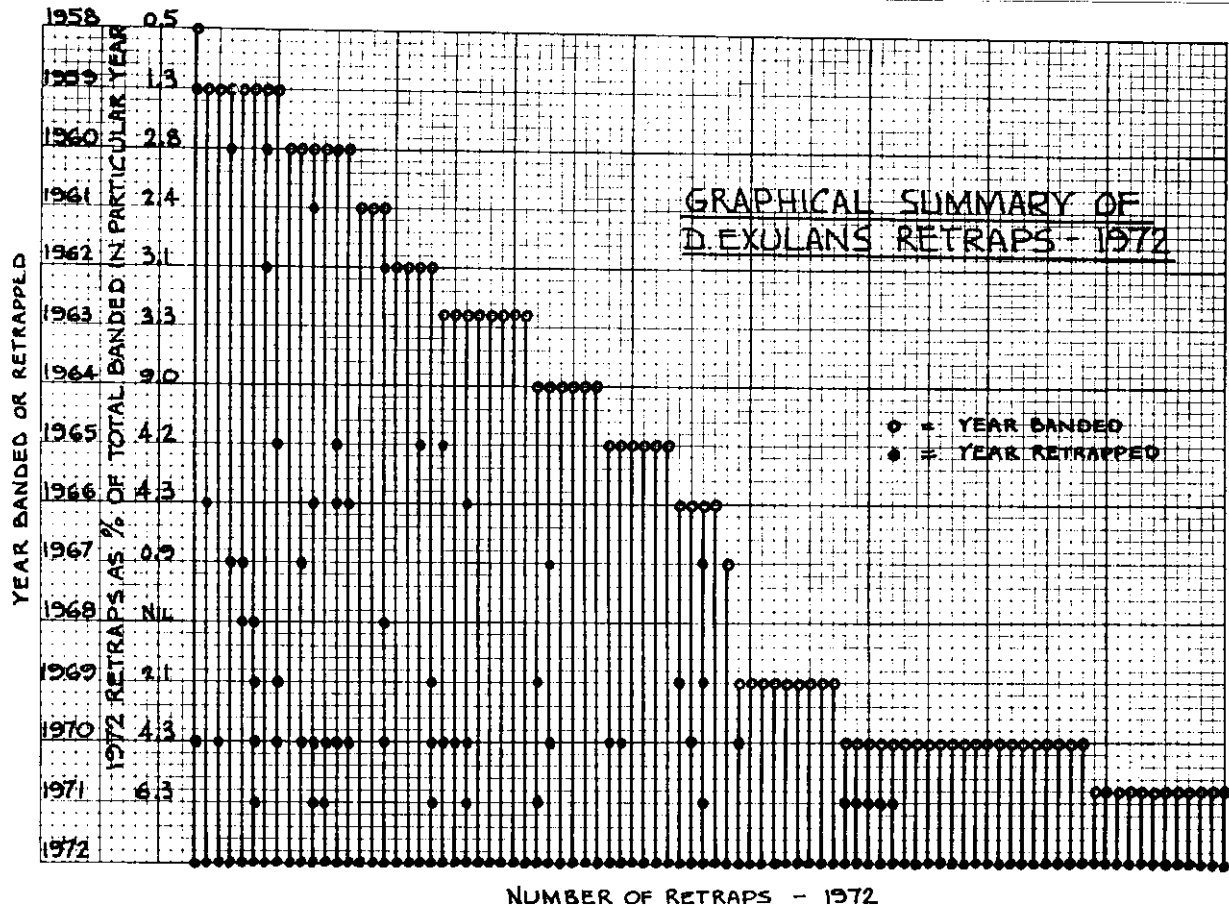
2. Includes one bird previously banded at South Georgia.

3. Both from Possession Island.

4. Banded at The Entrance, N.S.W.

5. *Macronectes giganteus* and *M. halli* not differentiated.

6. Excludes retakes of current season at banding place.



● Figure 1. Graphical summary demonstrating some aspects of Wandering Albatross retraps from both centres for 1972.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*: First returning birds appear in third week of August after which fair numbers are always encountered.

Fluttering Shearwater *Puffinus gavia*: Observed over the whole period but one can seldom be certain that *P. huttoni* is not also represented. The directional trend is southward. Largest numbers (hundreds) have been seen in late August. Beach derelicts over the period are singularly few compared with summer.

Australian Gannet *Sula serrator*: Almost invariably present, usually less than five. Immatures and adults.

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*: Always present.

Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*: Always present in small numbers.

White-fronted Tern *Sterna striata*: Singles and small groups on occasions over the whole period.

Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena*: In the years when southward migration of this species has been observed it has always been in the last week of August.

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