

# AN ALBINO LIGHT-MANTLED SOOTY ALBATROSS *Phoebastria palpebrata* CHICK AT ANTIPODES ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND

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While we were conducting seabird research on Antipodes Island, New Zealand (49°41'S, 178°48'E) on 7 February 1999, we noticed a white bird on the steep slopes above Alert Bay. We viewed the bird with binoculars and identified it as a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata* chick. We were able to gain closer access to the nest site to photograph and more closely observe the chick.

The chick was healthy and was approximately five to six weeks old. It was completely covered with pure white down whereas the down of typical Light-mantled Sooty Albatross chicks is grey. The mask around the face was visible but all feathers on the head were white. Its legs and feet were light pink, as was the skin at the base of the bill. The bill was bone-coloured with a reddish-brown tip on both the upper and lower mandible. The eye colour was unusual with the iris being purplish-blue and the pupil a dark, indigo colour. Otherwise the general appearance and behaviour of the chick was identical to that of a typical Light-mantled Sooty Albatross chick.

There are an estimated 200–300 breeding pairs of Light-mantled Sooty Albatross on Antipodes Island (Tennyson and Taylor in Taylor 2000) and approximately 5 000–10 000 breeding pairs within the New Zealand region (Robertson and Bell 1984). This is the first reported sighting of an albino Light-mantled Sooty Albatross in the Australasian region. Albinism is not common in Procellariiformes seabirds and has only been recorded in six species within the New Zealand region (Thompson *et al.* 2000). There is one record of a partial albino Light-mantled Sooty Albatross which was beachcast in Victoria. This bird had white patches on its hindneck, mantle, upper breast, belly and flanks (Marchant and Higgins 1990). The only other albatross species within the Australasian region

where albinism has been reported is the Shy Albatross *Thalassarche cauta* (Lepschi 1990; AW and SH, pers. obs.) which breeds in Tasmania.

On 23 February 1999, before we left Antipodes Island, we checked the albino Light-mantled Sooty Albatross chick and it still appeared to be healthy. The survival rate of albino albatrosses is unknown. At Albatross Island in western Bass Strait the population of Shy Albatrosses has been studied annually since 1980 and a number of albino chicks have been observed. No albino Shy Albatrosses have been recorded returning to Albatross Island (N. Brothers, pers. comm.) and it is assumed that they do not survive to reproductive maturity. However, an all-white bird has been observed at-sea south of Tasmania and was thought to be a Shy Albatross (T. Reid, pers. comm.).

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