

# CORELLA

## Journal of the Australian Bird Study Association

VOLUME 16

MAY, 1992

NUMBER 2

### Editorial

#### WHERE HAVE ALL THE WANDERERS GONE?

In an article published in 1955 on the Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* in New South Wales waters, Hindwood<sup>1</sup> reported that 100–400 albatrosses had been seen from Malabar Head, Sydney, sitting along the margin of the plume of discharges from the sewerage outfall. Since then on some days in July and August, over 500 birds have been seen from this headland<sup>2,3</sup>. Thus it was when banding commenced in 1958 and the New South Wales Albatross Study Group was formed<sup>2</sup>. Birds were banded at Malabar and at Bellambi about 60 km to the south, where albatrosses fed on dying cuttlefish. A few years later, the size of the particulate matter discharged at Malabar was reduced considerably. The numbers of Wandering Albatrosses subsequently seen at Malabar were also reduced. However, the numbers feeding at Bellambi, which is a natural feeding area, remained the same for many years, and each year Doug Gibson and his helpers banded a few hundred birds within 3 km of the shore. Eventually, a large percentage of the birds captured had been banded previously off New South Wales or at their breeding islands.

The study has been continued by Harry Battam but the number of birds banded has declined dramatically, from 919 during 1968–71 to 190 for 1988–91<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, even though cuttlefish are still abundant at Bellambi, it is necessary to go 5–10 km offshore to find albatrosses. *Where have the Wanderers gone?*

Declines in the survival of Wandering Albatrosses have been reported from the Crozets and South Georgia<sup>4,5</sup>. Nigel Brothers, who has sailed on Japanese tuna boats using long-lines of about 100 km with 3 000 baited hooks, reported that about 44 000 albatrosses, of which 10 000 could be Wanderers, may be killed each year from their taking these baited hooks<sup>6</sup>. Analyses of the breeding data collected over 30 years from Bird Island, South Georgia, show that this mortality is responsible for the decline in numbers at Bird Island<sup>5</sup>. French ornithologists have shown, using satellite telemetric techniques, that Wandering

Albatrosses may travel over 5–15 000 km of ocean when foraging for food for their chicks<sup>7</sup>. British scientists have obtained similar data and confirmed that females and males may exploit different oceanic zones<sup>8</sup>. Females feed more northerly than the males, and this takes them into the zones which are being fished for tuna using long-lines.

The problem is that baited hooks may take a while to sink and remain visible or may be kept at the surface by the turbulences from the propellers of the ship, and birds come to expect 'food'. A concerned captain had found that fewer birds were caught when plastic strips were suspended from a line dragged behind the ship. Further refinements, reported by Brothers, included equipment to throw baits randomly to either side of the ship, and thus destroy patterns of bait-appearance being anticipated by the birds. He claimed that the mortality could be reduced by 70–90 per cent by the adoption of these various techniques<sup>6</sup>.

The Wandering Albatross is a long-lived bird which may only commence to breed successfully when it is over ten years old. It only rears one chick every second year. Its numbers are declining at breeding islands and known non-breeding feeding-sites. Methods to reduce the numbers of Wanderers and other albatrosses caught on hooks of long-lines have been developed. Surely, we are now entitled to ask —

*What is actually being done to reduce this carnage?*

<sup>1</sup>Hindwood, K. A. (1955). *Emu* 55: 212–216.

<sup>2</sup>Gibson, D. G. and Sefton, A. R. (1959). *Emu* 59: 73–82.

<sup>3</sup>Battam, H. (unpublished data).

<sup>4</sup>Weimerskirch, H. and Jouventin, P. (1987). *J. Anim. Ecol.* 56: 1043–1055.

<sup>5</sup>Croxall, J. P. (1991). *20th Int. Ornith. Congr.* 1: 281–302.

<sup>6</sup>Brothers, N. (1991). *Biol. Conserv.* 55: 255–268.

<sup>7</sup>Jouventin, P. and Weimerskirch, H. (1990). *Nature* 343: 746–748.

<sup>8</sup>Prince, P. A., Wood, A. G., Barton, T. and Croxall, J. P. (1992). *Antarctic Science* 4: 31–36.

M. D. Murray