

Swinhoe's Storm-petrel seen at sea in the northeast Atlantic

Species: Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*

Date and time: 19th August 2008 from 1545-1552 hrs

Location: At sea 37°43.09'N/10°49.89'W (100 miles SW of Lisbon)

Observers: Ken D Shaw and Russell B Wynn

Weather: Stiff north wind, Force 5-6. Sunshine and scattered light cloud. Sun coming obliquely from behind (late afternoon), creating good viewing conditions.

Circumstances: KDS, who was undertaking marine wildlife observations on board the RRS *James Cook*, first saw the bird at about 150 m range on the starboard side of the ship. The bird appeared to be in feeding mode and gave four separate prolonged views, broken when the bird was lost behind wave crests. The bird then moved further away and was temporarily lost from view. By this time KDS was confident that it was a Swinhoe's-type Storm-petrel and had called it as such. RBW arrived on deck soon after and was fortunate to see the bird once at 300-400 m range (now in bright sunlight), heading rapidly southwards away from the ship at an oblique angle. An 'emergency chum' was carried out but was unsuccessful, although two Wilson's Storm-petrels were seen after 40 minutes.

Size and structure: Similar overall to Leach's or Madeiran Storm-petrel, and markedly larger than Wilson's Storm-petrel (seen shortly afterwards). This bird was a large, long-winged storm-petrel; KDS even thought in the first brief 'naked eye' view that it might be a Bulwer's, but immediately called it as Swinhoe's when seen with binoculars. Noticeably long slim wings with narrow wing bases, held straight out and level when in direct gliding flight with little or no flexing at carpal joint (therefore different to Leach's and Bulwer's). Wings appeared pointed during gliding flight. Narrow wing bases ensured head and tail both prominent; overall appeared 'gangly' and not compact like Wilson's. KDS noted tail quite long and narrow, moderately forked when seen well from all angles (less so than Leach's, but obvious when bird off the water and tail spread).

Flight: Fast, easy and quite direct, and long wings gave it a buoyant appearance. KDS noted that, when in feeding mode, the bird would come up out of wave trough and stay quite low along crest (low to water) and would then be pushed up and backwards by wind, coming quite high off sea. Never showed sharp directional changes as Leach's. RBW noted a more direct flight in downwind direction for several hundred metres, during which bird was taken by wind in rapid gliding/shearing flight with interchange between sub-horizontal glides and vertical shears, always on straight wings.

Behaviour: KDS noted bird apparently feeding; ran along top of waves and dipped down to water, presumably to seize food items. Stretched neck and dipped forwards. Not observed to land. Relatively easy to predict where it would appear next when lost behind wave crest.

Upperparts: KDS saw bird in light cloud, and noted that the head, body, tail and rump were concolourous dark brown appearing blackish. All of rump and rump sides were same colour as rest of body seen from all angles, with no hint of any white. Possibility of Leach's with reduced white rump definitely ruled out. RBW saw bird in strong sunlight and noted that the colouration was a warm 'milk chocolate' brown (those exact words used while watching the bird), with a slightly paler tone to head and lower back/rump area. Upperwings were overall dark brown with indistinct 'fuzzy' paler cream-brown carpal bar, not as strong as Wilson's (which seen shortly after). Carpal bar didn't extend to the carpal joint, so shape and tone more akin to Madeiran than Leach's. Lacked the markedly two-tone upperwing appearance of Leach's. Pale bases to primaries not observed (probably due to range).

Underparts: KDS noted as overall dark brown appearing black, RBW saw the bird in bright sunlight and underparts then appeared sooty brown. Underwings plain. No hint of white on rump sides.

The size, structure, plumage and flight action of this bird all point towards Swinhoe's Storm-petrel, and rule out all other dark-rumped storm-petrel species, except perhaps Matsudaira's. However, that species has a more deeply-forked tail, does not have a paler head, is significantly larger, and shows pale primary patches on the upperwing at ranges consistent with our observations. Despite not having any photos, we are confident in the identification of this bird as Swinhoe's Storm-petrel.