

BIRDS OBSERVED AT SEA DURING THE VOYAGE OF  
HMS *BLONDE* TO HAWAII (1824-1826)

By Storrs L. Olson.

It seems appropriate to put on record here some reports of birds observed at sea aboard a vessel of the Royal Navy that have remained unpublished for almost a century and three-quarters. In 1824 the 46-gun frigate *Blonde* departed England on a diplomatic mission to the Hawaiian Islands, under the command of George Anson, Lord Byron, who had succeeded to that title only a few months previously, upon the death of his cousin, the renowned poet.

The *Blonde* crossed the Atlantic to Brazil by way of Madeira, sailed round Cape Horn, stopping in Chile, Peru, and the Galapagos, before arriving in Hawaii. She returned in 1826 via Malden Island, Mauke (in the Cook group), Chile, and St. Helena. Aboard was a youthful and largely untrained naturalist, Andrew Bloxam, who prepared specimens and kept natural history notes during the voyage. Apart from a few observations incidentally included in a volume that appeared under Byron's name (Byron 1827) that was cobbled together by a compiler from several diaries, virtually nothing was published on the natural history of the voyage until I began my studies of Bloxam's manuscript natural history notes, which are housed at the British Museum (Natural History) (Olson 1986, in press a,b). These notes contain several references to landbirds observed at sea, as well as seabirds.

There are several transcriptions of Bloxam's notes. The passages that follow are from a fair copy, with additional or variant information from rougher notes inserted in brackets [ ]. I have standardised the dates and coordinates, which do not appear in the same format as in the original notes.

LANDBIRDS

**Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs***

11 Oct 1824. 48°33'N 07°50'W [Bay of Biscay] A pyefinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) was caught on deck this morning probably driven from land by the tempestuous weather. It is a native of England and not a bird of passage. Several snipes & petrels [Mother Cary's chickens] (*Procellaria Pelagica*) were observed in the course of the day.

I assume from the Latin name that this can only refer to the Chaffinch, although I have been unable to find "Pyefinch", even as a provincial name for this species, in such standard sources as Montagu (1831) or Newton (1896).

**Skylark *Alauda arvensis***

13 Oct 1824. 45°04'N 10°10'W [Bay of Biscay]. A Skylark was caught on deck today [this morning] (*Alauda arvensis*). It soon after died of overfatigue. [We fed it & kept it alive for some time. It died after a few days.]

**Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* and owl (*Strigiformes* sp. indet.)**

14 Oct 1824. 44°01'N 11°19'W. A Goldfinch (*Fringilla carduelis*) was caught this morning on deck [& soon died from fatigue]. A small white owl was also observed flying about but unwilling to settle. Our nearest distance from land C[ape] Finisterre about 120 miles.

**Swallow *Hirundo rustica* and "martins" (*Hirundinidae* spp. indet.)**

29 Oct 1824. 23°11'N 23°13'W. [Calm]. A flock of swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) flew and settled about the ship to day. [A single swallow settled, in evening several more appeared going to southward.]. The stormy petrel was also seen.

31 Oct 1824. 19°54'N 25°00'W. A large flock of swallows & martins settled about the ship to day & accompanied us for several days. Many were caught by the hands of the sailors as they flew close to us upon the deck for the purpose of taking flies.

**Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus***

31 Oct 1824. 19°54'N 25°00'W. A hen redstart (*Motacilla phoenicurus*) was observed about the ship to day. It continued with us several days & used to come into the ports of the after gun room to be fed night-morning. We suddenly missed it [one day], probably one of the cats on board had seized it at roost.

**Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana***

4 Nov 1824. 11°10'N 25°37'W. The spotted gallinule *Rallus porzana*, a bird rare in England, was caught on deck to day [& given to Lady Byron] [Length 8 1/2 inch, breadth 12 1/2 i.]

**Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus***

7 Nov 1824. 08°02'N 24°40'W. A beautiful female Kestrel Hawk (*Falco tinnunculus*) was caught in the rigging to day & preserved alive [some time] in a cage. It is remarkable that all the land birds hitherto seen [caught on board] are natives [inhabitants] of England.

**Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus***

23 Nov 1824 22°46'S 37°42'W. A beautiful land bird settled on the ship today [flew on board when off C. Frio] which answered in every respect to the *Corvus dubius* of Linnaeus, which is an inhabitant of the neighbouring coast of Brazil. It was about the size of a thrush. The back, tail & upper parts of a reddish [rusty] brown color, breast belly & under parts yellow. The crown of head black, from the base of the bill two broad white lines pass thro' the orbits and meet on the hind head. Bill & legs black. Its flight like that of a woodpecker. It was shot at [we shot at it] but unfortunately [it] fell overboard [into the sea & we were unable to pursue it]. [330 miles from Rio].

Bloxam's detailed description could seemingly apply only to the Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*, a common and conspicuous flycatcher throughout most of the Neotropical lowlands. At first consideration, the appearance of a Neotropical subspecies at sea at a point well over 200 miles from the nearest land would seem exceptional, which it may be. But the Great Kiskadee migrates out of the southern parts of its range (Sick 1993) and has been known to wander to Chile and the Falklands (Ridgely and Tudor 1994), so the occasional individual might be expected to stray far out to sea from time to time.

Bloxam's notes raise something of a nomenclatural conundrum: what is the identity of *Corvus dubius*? Bloxam's only source of bird names was Turton's (1800) translation of the 13th edition of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, which was compiled by Gmelin (1788-9). The *Corvus dubius* of Gmelin (1788:369) is based on a description by Jacquin (1784) of a bird from Cartagena, Colombia. Bloxam's description of the bird he observed at sea reads almost like a direct translation of Gmelin's Latin description, so I think that there can be little doubt that both refer to the Great Kiskadee. But the name *Corvus dubius* Gmelin seems simply to have disappeared from the ornithological literature without a trace or an explanation. It is difficult to believe that for the past 200 years compilers could have overlooked a Gmelin name and failed to dispose of it, but I could not find *Corvus dubius* listed as a synonym in any of the passerine volumes of the *Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum*, nor did I find it in other sources with good lists of synonyms, such as Hellmayr (1927). This is highly curious, but of no nomenclatural consequence. If both names refer to the Great Kiskadee, then *Corvus dubius* Gmelin (1788) is simply a junior synonym of *Lanius sulphuratus* Linnaeus (1766).

**Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis***

30 Dec 1825. This morning a land bird was caught on deck. Upon examination I found it to be the *Fringilla Australis*, which is found in Tierra del Fuego & also the whole of Chili. We were at the time it flew on board exactly 37 miles south of Staten land, with a northerly breeze.

*Fringilla australis* is a synonym of *Zonotrichia capensis*, the Rufous-collared Sparrow, one of the most widely distributed of Neotropical birds and a common inhabitant of southern South America.

**Snowy Sheathbill *Chionis alba***

31 Dec 1825. 2 white birds were seen early this morning around the ship, & from their description were evidently the Sheathbill. We were about 100 miles SE of the Falkland islands in about [latitude and longitude left blank]. They were described as being about the size of a Pidgeon, white, with short wings, & red legs, the latter not palmated.

**Hummingbird (*Trochilidae* sp. indet.)**

28 Sept 1825. Humming bird 10 miles from land.

This observation was mentioned in a short summary list of land bird sightings that included many of the preceding records, but I did not find this hummingbird mentioned anywhere else in Bloxam's notes. On this date the *Blonde* must have been near Concepcion, Chile, where the ship anchored the following day.

**SEABIRDS**

The following are most of Bloxam's observations of pelagic birds, except those associated with particular islands or ports. These notes have little other than historical interest, but in places they invoke an appreciation of the superb oceanic adaptations of procellariiform birds that will certainly be shared among readers of this journal.

Unfortunately, few of the seabirds that Bloxam collected were prepared as specimens, and of those only a few terns appear to have survived (Olson, in press a). Had he been more diligent in this regard, and had his collections been properly studied, additional birds new to science would have been credited to the voyage of the *Blonde*, as Bloxam's notes indicate that he handled several species of seabirds that had not at the time been described.

**Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus***

Nov 1824. Procellaria Pelagica

Caught on the line

Length 6 1/2 Inch, breadth 15 D[itt]o. Length from knee joint to middle toe 2 1/2 Inch. Foot one inch long, no spur behind. The webs beautiful orange color surrounded with black. Legs stick out an inch beyond the tail. Larger species than one caught nr the Galapagos.

By "caught on the line" I assume Bloxam was referring to the Equator, which the *Blonde* first crossed on 12 November 1824 rather than the method of capture. The "knee joint" must refer to the intertarsal joint; the long tarsus in combination with the rest of the description indicate that the species must have been *Oceanites oceanicus*, which had been described only four years previously and would have been unknown to Bloxam.

**Galapagos Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma* sp.**

Stormy Petrel. Taken nr the Galapagos March 1825. Length 7 inches. Breadth 13 l. No back spur. Webs black. Color dusky black, tail coverts white.

The dark webs and lack of white on the belly eliminates *Oceanites gracilis*. This might be any one of the three *Oceanodromas* occurring in this area - the Galapagos, Madeiran or Leach's Storm-petrel *O. tethys*, *O. castro* or *O. leuchoroa*.

### White-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta grallaria* (?)

*Procellaria pelagica*

A variety in the So seas--in Lat. 35°S, Long 81°W. Same size as the common P. P. & has tail coverts white, with the under plumage white also.

Although this description might apply to various storm-petrels, at the coordinates given, near Juan Fernandez, *F. grallaria* would probably be the most likely. Bloxam included all storm-petrels under the name *Procellaria pelagica*, although he clearly recognized that more than one kind was involved. Thus, if we allow that the storm-petrels Bloxam saw off the Bay of Biscay actually were *Hydrobates pelagicus*, then he appears to have encountered at least four species of storm-petrels during the voyage.

### Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*

13 Jan 1825. 53°19'S 63°16'W. Being now between the Falkland islands & main coast of America we saw a great variety [quantities] of sea birds [of different species]. Several of the petrel species, a small black duck the size of a widgeon & the Wandering Albatross for the first time (*Diomedea exulans*). As we now saw these constantly on our passage round Cape Horn, I had an opportunity of observing them accurately. They are seldom met with so far to the North as the tropics. We observed them in far greater numbers to the Westward of Cape Horn than to the Eastward. They are seldom taken except when ships are obliged to lay to in a storm or in a calm when they swim under the stem of the vessel and will greedily take a hook baited with a piece of pork or meat. It is difficult to bring them down with shot, as from their immense size & thickness of feather, it has but little effect upon them. They are always slow in taking their food and invariably settle in the water for the purpose, from which owing to their immense extent of wing they are sometime in rising. Their flight resembles very much that of Birds of Prey, scarcely ever flapping their wings but skimming slowly & majestically immediately over the wake, sometimes in a direct line, sometimes wheeling to the right or left, approaching without fear within a few yards of the ship. Their wings are very long but narrow & project nearly at right angles from their body when extended. Their tail is short. The extent of the wings of most of them appeared to be nine or ten feet, tho' some must been at least fourteen & instances have been known where they have been eighteen feet from tip to tip. They seem to have as great a variety of color as the common [brown] gull. Their heads however are almost invariably of a dull white, which is the case also with their belly & under parts of their wing. The following were the colors of several varieties that I observed--age probably causes it.

- No. 1. The upper surface of back, wings, & tail of dark brown; the under parts white.
- No. 2. The upper surface of the wings & tail brown, back white.
- No. 3. The whole dull [pure] white color.
- No. 4. The upper surface of wings alone brown, all the rest a dirty [snow] white.

So great is the variety of color, that scarcely two in a whole flock resemble each other. The most beautiful were those which were purely white [of a pure snowy whiteness]. These however were rare & seldom met with. We met with them in the greatest abundance about the same latitude and [much more to the No] on the Pacific side of C. Horn. We saw several on the day we entered Valparaiso, but did not see any more to the No excepting a flock of five in [seen going out of] Callao Roads in So Lat. 12° 3'. We were unsuccessful in procuring any on our way round the Cape.

24 Jan 1825. 54°50'S 80°55'W. We saw great quantities of these birds to day. *Diomedea exulans* or the Wandering Albatross--Guns & rifles were in requisition to fire at them as they came close to the vessel sometimes flying over it but generally over the quarters tho' we fired at them above 50 times only one was fairly brought down & that by myself with swan shot about 20 yards distant. Shot seems scarcely to have any effect upon them. As we were going at the rate of 7 knots we were unable to lower a boat to procure it.

Although Bloxam probably included all the albatrosses he saw under the name *D. exulans*, those described above correspond very well to various plumage stages of that species, which are due, as Bloxam rightly assumed, to differences in age. That various crew of the *Blonde*, including Bloxam, made sport of shooting at these birds shows that even a quarter century after the appearance of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, superstitions regarding the

killing of albatrosses were not prevalent in the Royal Navy. Certainly no ill fortune befell the *Blonde*, which had fair weather throughout the entire voyage, nor did Bloxam suffer in the least from having slain an albatross, for he returned safely to England and lived a peaceful life as a country parson for another 52 years.

#### **Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris***

A small albatross was shot to day [31 December 1825]. Extent of wing 7 feet 1 inch. Breadth of wing 6-7 inches. Length 3 feet. Color: upper surface of wings, the back & extremity of tail black, head neck tail coverts breast & belly pure white, a small dusky bar over the eye. Legs light olive color, palmated, only 3 toes, no hind spur. Bill light yellow, exactly resembling that of the albatross. Tongue short, nostrils [oval?] at base of bill subtubular.

The description can only apply to *D. melanophris*, a species then unknown and that remained unnamed until 1828. This account followed that of the Sheathbill (see above) on a day when the *Blonde* was about 100 miles SE of the Falklands.

#### **Cape Petrel *Daption capense***

Procellaria capensis

Habits & manners with description of the Pintado or Cape Pidgeon--so called for being so common about the Cape Horn.

We did not see any of these birds on our coming round Cape Horn, but first fell in with them in about So Lat 30 & W. Long. 158. From thence they accompanied us every day until our arrival at Valparaiso. We consequently had a good opportunity of observing them. They are apparently the tamest of the petrel tribe, keeping constantly close in the wake of the ship, & are also the most voracious, biting at every thing thrown overboard, & are easily caught by a small hook or bent pin baited with a piece of fat. They are sometimes caught [procured] in dozens in this manner when the ship is going slow thro' the water & are reckoned good eating by the sailors. Their mottled brown & white color is very pleasing to the eye.

They are about 14 inches long, the head dark brown, the back to the extremity of the tail which is black is freckled white & black. The upper surface of the wings are tipped at the end with black, then an irregular white mark, then black & again an irregular white mark to the back. The under parts are white.

The wings project nearly at right angles with their bodies, & they seldom flap them. It is difficult indeed to conceive in what manner they can go against the wind, without any apparent motion of their wings, but if attentively observed, a slight & almost constant quivering of them is observed, which no doubt greatly aids them on. Nature has wonderfully provided for all the birds of the petrel & albatross race, in giving them immense strength of muscle in their wing & also the latter of immense length, but slight breadth, to skim over the waves of the ocean with the least possible resistance from the air. Their feathers also are of great thickness & plentifully supplied with oil to resist the cold & water. Thus armed by nature they subsist during the greater part of the year roaming over immense tracts of sea in search of food, returning to land only during the breeding season. Description of one caught on board. [I have omitted further description.] A very voracious, tame & pretty bird resembling a pidgeon in appearance. Can with great difficulty rise from the ground generally inhabits the cold parts of the Southern Hemisphere, particularly about C. Horn.

#### **Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus***

Procellaria magna AB [=Andrew Bloxam]

24 Aug 1825. 33°15'S 121°41'W. A very large bird flying over the ship to day, struck against one of the after ropes & the concussion was so great as to bring him down in board. I found it to be one of the largest species of petrel. Length from bill to tail 32 inches, extent from wing to wing 6 feet 6 inch, bill 4 inches long, light olive green. Nostrils two tubes contained in one sheath. Tongue length of bill, entire fleshy & round at end. Legs brownish blue. Color deep brown or dark chocolate all over intermingled with lighter shades here & there. Tail rounded 14 [feather]s, light brown at the tip also the 1st quill feather. Called by the sailors a Nelly.

Bloxam must have overlooked the name *Procellaria gigantea* Gmelin in his copy of Turton (1800) when he coined his own name *P. magna* for the Giant Petrel *Macronectes gigantea*.

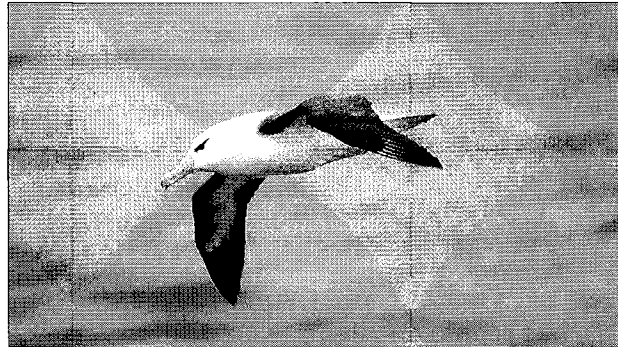
#### Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis* (?)

January 1826 The first few days in this month we fell in with several petrels of a species I had not seen before. They were about 12 or 14 inches long. Upper plumage brown, beneath white, a white ring round their neck, the head being brown. *Procellaria annulata* ring necked petrel.

The date would have put the *Blonde* in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands where the bird perhaps most likely to correspond to Bloxam's description would have been the Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*, a species that would not have been known to Bloxam. His own name *Procellaria annulata* was never published and has no nomenclatural standing.

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Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris*, Antarctic Peninsula - January 1993.  
Photo: LA (Metoc) Chris Patrick RN.