

## LITTLE PIECE OF RINGING HISTORY

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In October 1995, a small colony of Leach's Storm Petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* was discovered on a coastal island in Western Cape Province, South Africa (Whittington & Dyer 1995, Whittington 1996). Suspicions that they might be breeding were confirmed in November 1996 when an adult was found incubating an egg. In February 1997, a large chick was present in the same nest cavity (Whittington *et al.* 1998).

Hitherto, Leach's Storm Petrel was considered to be a non-breeding visitor to the southern Atlantic and equatorial Pacific oceans, all known breeding colonies being in the Northern Hemisphere (Harrison 1983, Marchant & Higgins 1990, Maclean 1993, Ryan & Whittington 1997). This is the first known breeding colony of this species both in the Southern Hemisphere and on the African continent. In 1997, a bird was found occupying a potential nest cavity on another Western Cape island. Whilst breeding at the second locality has yet to be proven, it seems likely that there are at least two breeding localities in South Africa (Whittington *et al.* in press).

Numbers at the main locality appear to be stable with at least 18-20 birds calling from suitable nest sites. In December 1997, an adult Leach's Storm Petrel was ringed by Prof. L. G. Underhill, only the eighth individual of this species to be ringed in southern Africa. In February 1998, at least six nests, each with a chick, were located. Two chicks were ringed and thus became the first chicks of this species to be ringed in Africa and the Southern Hemisphere. A further two chicks were ringed in February 1999.

Access to the island is difficult and thus visits by ornithologists infrequent. The adult storm petrels feed out at sea during daylight hours, probably beyond the continental shelf, only coming to land during the hours of darkness (Ryan and

Whittington 1997). These factors probably explain why these colonies have remained undiscovered until recently. Nests are located deep inside dry-stone walls and an old water tank, most of which are inaccessible to predators and researchers alike. The chief predator of Leach's Storm Petrels on the islands is the Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*.

The petrels avoid the gulls, which are numerous on both islands, by only coming ashore on non-moonlit nights. The petrels appear to leave the colonies from March onwards, returning again in October. Where they go in between these times is presently a mystery.

It is hoped that ringing these birds, when opportunity arises, will eventually provide some information on nest site fidelity, whether chicks return to breed at their natal colony and, perhaps, where the birds wander to between breeding seasons.

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