

Albatrosses in trouble

One of the primary reasons for conducting scientific research on birds is to apply the knowledge and understanding gained to solving practical conservation problems.

Frequently the combination of factors causing a problem is not as obvious as it may appear at first glance: this can lead to considerable costs incurred in applying inappropriate management.

This issue's article on the Wandering Albatross (see page 28) highlights the plight of this magnificent bird and its relatives as a result of the widespread and increasing incidence of longline fishing. Albatrosses and petrels are caught and drowned when they swallow baited hooks as the longline gear is set. The FitzPatrick

Institute has joined international efforts to address this problem. Our research activities include direct observations of the behaviour of birds in the vicinity of longlining vessels to find ways of reducing the numbers of birds caught. A variety of measures involving changes in fishing operations have been identified, and a programme to educate fishermen of the advantages



Albatrosses gather with impunity to feed on offal and fish at demersal trawlers, but the same behaviour has potentially lethal consequences when they are attracted to longline vessels.

PHIL HOCKEY

of not catching birds is being undertaken by Christian Boix, funded by WWF-SA.

This programme targets both the South African longline fisheries for hake and tuna, as well as the recently established Patagonian toothfish fishery around the sub-Antarctic Prince Edward Islands.

At the same time, Deon Nel has been studying the impact of longline mortality

on seabird populations breeding at Marion Island, the South African possession in the Southern Ocean. He has been attaching high-tech remote-sensing devices, developed by Rory Wilson, an ex-FitzPatrick graduate, to albatrosses. When the birds return to their nest sites from a foraging trip, the devices use differences in day-length to track where the birds went and whether they are likely to have been

at risk from longliners.

Recently it was feared that a female bird carrying a device had been killed, because she failed to return to feed her chick for more than a month but, to everyone's surprise and relief, she finally re-appeared – almost two months late. It will be interesting to see where she went during this long absence from the island. However, the discovery of hooks from both the bluefin tuna and Patagonian toothfish longline fisheries at albatross nests on the island shows that our populations are at risk. □

STOP PRESS ~ Birding in northern Namibia

From 3–10 May and 17–24 May 1997, the FitzPatrick's Professor Phil Hockey, in conjunction with Felix Unite Tours, will be running two birding trips to the middle reaches of the Kunene River, west of Ruacana, Namibia. The river is potentially threatened by a hydro-electric scheme.

The mode of transport for the trips will be overland – not by water! The

groups will be looking for the local specials, which include Grey Kestrel, Cinderella Waxbill, Black-faced Babbler and Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush.

The fully catered price ex-Windhoek will be R4 500 per person. Numbers on both tours are limited.

For bookings and further details, contact Penny Kavalsky on tel. (021) 683-6433; fax (021) 683-6485.

Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, Cape Town, South Africa. Phone (021) 650-3290; fax (021) 650-3295; e-mail birds@botzoo.uct.ac.za