



JOHN COOPER

## TRISTAN ALBATROSSES *off South Africa*

The Critically Endangered Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* is genetically the most distinct form of the Wandering Albatross *D. exulans*. It is on average smaller and takes longer to acquire its white adult plumage, but at sea it is almost impossible to separate from the Wandering Albatross (see *Africa – Birds & Birding* 5(4): 35–39). Identification can usually only be confirmed close to Gough Island in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, where virtually all Tristan Albatrosses breed. However, in 2007, in a long-term study colony and using field-readable plastic leg rings, John Cooper started banding breeding Tristan Albatrosses.

**Above** Male C70 photographed on his nest in 2007, when he was first ringed.

**Right** Female A95 landing behind the longliner off Namibia in August 2009. Note the dusky breast band and cap typical of most adult female Tristan Albatrosses.

By 2009, 650 individuals, representing more than 10 per cent of the adult population, had been ringed.

In August 2009 two of these ringed Tristan Albatrosses were photographed 150 miles off the South African west coast, close to the Namibian border. The three digits on each ring were clearly legible, providing the first confirmed at-sea records of this species in the region.

The two albatrosses, A95 and C70, were photographed by Meidad Goren of BirdLife South Africa's Albatross Task Force as they scavenged behind a longliner, during a trip studying methods to reduce seabird bycatch. Both birds had been banded as breeding adults in 2007. A95 is a female that raised a chick with a 23-year-old male (C28) in 2007. Like most Tristan Albatrosses, she then took a year off (2008), but failed to breed again in 2009, probably because C28 did not arrive at the colony. He has not been seen since and is likely to have died; some 500 Tristan Albatrosses are killed every year by longliners.

A95 was spotted behind the longliner twice in one week. She was probably building up reserves for the 2010 season and using the longliner as a reliable (if dangerous) source of food. Together with a new partner, C39, she laid an egg in early 2010, and that was reared to the end of the guard phase. But when the nest was checked again in July 2010 it was deserted. Most chicks that die at this stage of the season have been killed by mice.

C70 is an adult male that has bred with his partner, B23, since at least 2004. They raised a chick in 2004, failed to breed successfully in 2006, but then raised chicks again in 2007 and 2009. When photographed behind the longliner, C70 was busy gathering food for his hungry four- to five-month-old chick that was waiting for its father's return on Gough Island, approximately 2 500 kilometres away.

A95 and C70 were two of a group of at least 16 wandering-type Tristan albatrosses that were following the fishing vessel. Thanks to the coloured rings, the fishermen were aware of the fact that these birds are Critically Endangered and made extra efforts to ensure that no birds were caught, deploying two bird-scaring lines, only setting their lines at night and placing heavy weights near the hooks to increase sinking rate. With this kind of conservation effort at sea, one can only hope that A95, C70 and the rest of the Tristan Albatrosses will survive to breed in many more seasons.

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