



jouanin's petrel

- or is it?

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Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* is an enigmatic petrel that was first described in 1955 and the first nest reported only in 2002. Unlike the smaller, widespread Bulwer's Petrel *B. bulwerii*, it is confined to tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and is most common off the Arabian Peninsula. Some 3000 pairs are estimated to breed on the sheer western cliffs of Socotra, but it probably also breeds at small islands or coastal cliffs in Oman and possibly even on cliffs along the Somali coast. A third *Bulweria* petrel, Olson's Petrel *B. bifax*, used to breed on St Helena in the tropical Atlantic Ocean but

above A typical Jouanin's Petrel, photographed off Oman, showing the heavy bill and uniform upperwing coverts.

it became extinct shortly after the island was settled in the 1500s.

Jouanin's Petrels breed from May to September during the summer monsoon. Non-breeding birds disperse widely throughout the tropical Indian Ocean, mainly between 15°N and 15°S, reaching as far east as the Timor Sea between Australia and Indonesia (Ryan et al. 2013, *Ostrich* 84: 157-160). The species is included on the southern African list based on a handful of sightings from the Mozambique Channel (Ryan et al. 2006, *Bulletin of the African Bird Club* 13: 197-204), but there are no photographic records from this area and it is not included on the African Bird Club's list for Mozambique. Ten were recorded during seven oceanographic cruises in the northern

Mozambique Channel from 2002 to 2010 (Jaquemet et al. 2014, *Deep-sea Research II* 100: 200-211), but all were from the territorial waters of Madagascar, the Comoros or France (around Juan de Nova).

Until recently, all southern African records were from November and December, but the significance of this restricted period of occurrence has been hard to assess given the limited search effort. Dom Rollinson racked up an impressive list of seabird firsts for Mozambique from a tuna long-liner fishing in the Mozambique Channel between August and mid-October 2015, when he encountered one Jouanin's Petrel approximately 120 kilometres east of Vilanculos on 5 October (Rollinson in press, *Bulletin of the African Bird Club*). His lack of earlier records

suggests that Jouanin's Petrels only arrive in the Mozambique Channel in early summer, after the breeding season. It is unknown when they return north.

In November 2017 I was fortunate to join an oceanographic cruise on the SA *Agulhas II* from Dar es Salaam to Durban. As is typical of tropical waters, seabirds were generally scarce, with significant concentrations only around Latham Island off Tanzania. Petrels were decidedly rare, with Jouanin's the only species seen off Tanzania and northern Mozambique; Great-winged Petrels were common off KwaZulu-Natal, with a few stragglers reaching southern Mozambique. Seven Jouanin's Petrels were seen, four off Mozambique from 9 to 11 November and although they were not particularly confiding, two individuals were photographed, constituting the first confirmed records from Mozambique. All the birds were in early wing moult, having fresh greater coverts and growing their inner primaries. The new coverts were pale grey, forming a bar across the upperwing.

But were they Jouanin's Petrels? In early November 2014, Hadoram Shirihai visited the Comoros archipelago at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel to photograph the 'Mohéli' form of Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus temptator*. With more than 100 birds seen, Jouanin's Petrels were the

second most common procellariiform he encountered, occurring at densities unknown away from the breeding areas.

However, Shirihai's impression was that these birds were smaller and had more slender bills than typical Jouanin's Petrels observed around Socotra. Like the birds off northern Mozambique, most were in moult, with fresh greater coverts that contrast more strongly with the rest of the upperwing than is typical of Jouanin's Petrels. Shirihai and Bretagnolle (2015, *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 135: 348-351) suggest that the Comoros birds may represent an undescribed population of *Bulweria* petrels, but the fact that they were in moult suggests that they were unlikely to breed on the Comoros. Adding to the confusion, the few measurements available of Bulwer's Petrels from Round Island off Mauritius average larger than birds from the Pacific or Atlantic Ocean colonies. Clearly more work is needed on these intriguing and poorly known tropical petrels.

Shirihai's images from the Comoros closely resemble the birds photographed off northern Mozambique at the same time of year. So although we now have photographic evidence that Jouanin's-type petrels occur in Mozambican waters, their identity remains controversial, pending further information on whether the Comoros birds do indeed differ from Jouanin's Petrels.

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above The first photographic evidence of Jouanin's Petrel off Mozambique on 9 November 2017, showing characteristics of the Comoros birds.

below and below, left A Jouanin's-type petrel photographed off the Comoros in early November. Note the newly grown pale greyish greater coverts forming a pale bar on the wing and the relatively slender bill.

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