DISCOVERY OF A NEW SPECIES OF *OCEANODROMA* STORM-PETREL – A GULF COAST CONNECTION

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It began with a phone call to us from Ann Forster on 28 April 1998. And thence began a story of investigation, scholarship, tragedy and science that resulted in our area's assistance in the discovery of a new species of storm-petrel from the Azores.

Barry Sweatt, a fisherman out of Orange Beach, AL brought a petrel that had landed on his boat in the Gulf of Mexico on April 27th to Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida for rehabilitation. This was not the first time he had done this. On other occasions he brought in several petrels for rehabilitation by Dorothy Kaufmann and her staff, and most were successfully released from the Forster's home near the entrance to Pensacola Bay. But in this instance the attempted release was unsuccessful and the bird died. Noticing that the bird had a band on the leg, Ann gave it to us for transfer to Archbold Biological Station in Lake Placid, Florida as a valuable museum specimen.

Upon receiving the bird, a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma castro*), we observed that the band was not a standard US Fish & Wildlife band. It read CEMPA LISBOA D017788. Lucy traced its origin to the Centro de Estudos de Migracoes e Proteccao de Aves, Lisbon, Portugal, and found that this small pelagic bird had been banded on 25 September 1993 on Praia Islet, Graciosa Island in the Azores. It was a female at least 6 years old!

Band-rumped Storm-Petrels spend most of the year in the ocean and return to land only for a few months to breed. Until recent years, they were not known to frequent the Gulf of Mexico and western Atlantic with any regularity. Thus, the specimens from the Gulf corroborated sight reports from birders taking pelagic trips into the offshore Gulf.

Bob began an article on this recovery for the *Florida Field Naturalist* and contacted Dr. Glen Woolfenden, director of Archbold Biological Station in Lake Placid, FL since he prepared the specimen, and it was decided to collaborate. He in turn contacted the researcher banding in the Azores, Luis R. Monteiro, of the Department of Oceanography and Fisheries, University of the Azores, and learned of an interesting study underway at the time by this graduate student and his colleagues. The article appeared in the *Journal of Field Ornithology* (Woolfenden, G. E., Monteiro, L. R. and Duncan, R. A. 2000.

Recovery from the Northeastern Gulf of Mexico of a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel banded in the Azores. *Journal of Field Ornithology*. 72:62-65). This was the *first* recovery from the western Atlantic, and Montiero was ecstatic. Little did he know how exciting it was to become.

Woolfenden discovered from Monteiro that he and his colleagues established that there were two breeding populations of Band-rumped Storm-Petrels in the Azores. One bred in the cool season and the other in the hot season, and researchers suspected they might actually be two separate species based on measurements and plumage characteristics observed when there was breeding-season overlap of the two groups. "Our" bird turned out to be a "cool-season" bird. During the time our article was being written, tragedy occurred, and Luis Monteiro was killed in a helicopter crash while furthering his research. He never lived to see it published.

The study continued, however, and culminated in another publication (Bolton, M., Smith, A. L., Gomez-Diaz, E., Friesen, V. L., Medeiros, R., Bried, J. Roscales, J. L. and Furness, R. W. 2008. Monteiro's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma monteiroi*: a new species from the Azores. *The Ibis.* 150: 717-727). The research concluded that the two breeding populations were indeed two separate species based on several factors. DNA evidence indicated genetic distinction as did different vocalizations. Warm-season birds were smaller, with longer, more deeply-forked tails and smaller, thinner bills than cool-season breeders. And the seasonal molts of each population did not coincide.

So how did our Gulf of Mexico specimen contribute to the split? The timing of molt in the primaries was an important factor. Did both populations molt at the same time or at different times? The problem was that the progression of molt of cool-season birds between April and July was unknown because the birds dispersed to the open ocean and could not be scrutinized. Until our specimen was examined along with four others from the Gulf of Mexico and salvaged through the Wildlife Sanctuary, it could not be determined which population dispersed to the western Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. Our specimens were molting their primaries, indicating they were cool-season breeders since they molt after breeding. This factor helped determine that the cool-season breeding birds were a species separate from the warm-season breeders.

So are the two species separable in the field? The authors indicate it is well nigh impossible to do so. But don't worry, all you listers out there. The newly-described, warm-season breeding Monteiro's Storm-Petrel numbers are estimated at no more than 250 – 300 pairs, and although the distribution outside

the breeding season is unknown, it is thought that it does not occur in the western Atlantic.

Luis Monteiro did not live to see his hard work come to fruition, and Glen Woolfenden, who died before the publication of the split, did not witness the part played out on this side of the Atlantic. But they must have suspected they were part of the discovery of a new species. The importance of salvaging specimens through rehabilitation centers like Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida cannot be overstated.

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SPRING SIGHTINGS (MARCH - MAY 2008)

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This report covers the period from March through May 2008 in Alabama and the Florida Panhandle (west of the Apalachicola River). The appearance of observations in this article does not suggest verification or acceptance of records for very rare species; these must be considered by the appropriate state records committees. All submissions of birds that are rare, either in general or for a particular season or region, must be accompanied by adequate details of the observation. The extent of this documentation depends on the rarity of the species and the difficulty of identification. For guidance, observers are encouraged to consult the Alabama Ornithological Society checklist. Reports should note conditions of observation and the diagnostic characters observed. Your help in this matter is appreciated.

Abbreviations and italics: County names are in italics and, except for the Florida counties of *Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa*, and *Walton*, are in Alabama. "@" = under review by; "ABRC" = Alabama Bird Records Committee; "b." = banded; FOSRC = Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee; "m.ob." = many observers; "NABS" = North Alabama Birdwatcher's Society; "NF" = National Forest; "NWR" = National Wildlife Refuge; "ph." = photographed; "SP" = State Park; "WMA" = Wildlife Management Area "WP" = Western Panhandle of Florida (*Escambia, Okaloosa,* and *Santa Rosa* counties).