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**Front Cover:** New Caledonian Storm-petrel in Continental Slope waters ENE of Southport,  
21 April 2018 © Paul Walbridge

# First record of New Caledonian Storm-petrel *Fregatta lineata* for Australia

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## Abstract

This note establishes that the first Australian record of the New Caledonian Storm-petrel *Fregatta lineata* was of a beach-washed specimen found in 1973, rather than sightings in 2010 as claimed in recent literature. The confusion has arisen from misidentification of the 1973 specimen, which was originally identified as a Black-bellied Storm-petrel *F. tropica*.

## Introduction

Until recently the taxonomy, distribution and status of the New Caledonian Storm-petrel *Fregatta lineata* were little-known (Bretagnolle *et al.* 2022). The species was first described in 1848 from a specimen collected in Samoa in 1839 (Peale 1848) but was not seen in the field until 2008 off southern New Caledonia. Initially identified as a New Zealand Storm-petrel *F. maoriana*, this bird and others seen subsequently in the same area were later thought potentially to be New Caledonian Storm-petrels (Collins 2013). In the field, *F. lineata* appears larger, longer-winged and longer-legged than *F. maoriana*, and has denser and bolder belly streaking (Collins 2013; front cover, Plates 1, 4). The white underwing panel of *F. lineata* is narrower than and not as clean-looking as *F. maoriana*, and its white rump patch is narrower and rounder (Bretagnolle *et al.* 2022; Walbridge *et al.* 2023).

The New Caledonian Storm-petrel is not known historically from Australian waters. Individuals of what was described as a “lost” species were first detected in Australia in 2010 (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). Since 2011, however, the species has been recorded on numerous occasions off the Queensland and New South Wales coasts, with more than 170 individuals sighted during both inshore day trips and offshore Seamount trips from Southport, Gold Coast, South-east Queensland (Haass & Stephenson 2022; Walbridge *et al.* 2023). In April 2014, one individual was captured and it remains the only live bird to have been examined and measured in the hand (Walbridge *et al.* 2023).

## Earliest record

On 22 July 22 1973, I was conducting a patrol for beach-washed seabirds on North Stradbroke Island, south-east Queensland, with Chris Corben and Anita Smyth. Twelve kilometres south of Point Lookout on the ocean beach at low tide, I picked up a dead storm-petrel at the high tide mark. My notes at the time record it as having a diffuse sooty black line running along the mid-line of the white belly. We concluded it was a Black-bellied Storm-petrel *F. tropica*, though little was known about the status and distribution of this species in Australian waters at the time. The finding was published as the first record of Black-bellied Storm-Petrel for Queensland (Roberts 1973), although Storr (1973) had listed the species for the state on the basis of two museum specimens of uncertain provenance. It is now known to be a regular winter visitor to waters off the east Australian coast; in 2017 for instance, a total of 21 Black-bellied

Storm-petrels were seen during offshore sea-birding excursions off Southport between May and September (Walbridge 2019).

The North Stradbroke Island specimen was deposited in the Queensland Museum (QM 14391; Plate 2). However, during a visit to the Queensland Museum by V. Bretagnolle, the 1973 specimen was re-identified as a New Caledonian Storm-petrel and a photograph of the specimen was published (Bretagnolle *et al.* 2022); other observers agree with this identification. Bretagnolle *et al.* (2022) state that the museum visit took place in 2017 but in fact it was in January 2015 (P. Walbridge *et al.* 2023).



**Plate 1.** Left, New Caledonian Storm-petrel, Britannia Seamount, April 2014 (Brian Russell); right, New Zealand Storm-petrel, Hauraki Gulf, North Island, New Zealand, December 2010 (Raja W. Stephenson)



**Plate 2.** First Australian specimen of New Caledonian Storm-petrel, obtained in Queensland in July 1973 (David Stewart)

This note corrects the record on the first reported Black-bellied Storm-petrel for Queensland (Roberts 1973); this bird is now known to be a New Caledonian Storm-petrel. The first sightings of the New Caledonian Storm-petrel in Australian waters were made in 2010 off Port Stephens, then Ulladulla, New South Wales, followed in June 2011 with the first Southport bird (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017; Haass & Stephenson 2022; Walbridge *et al.* 2023). While the 2010 sightings remain the first known live sightings of the New Caledonian Storm-petrel in Australia, the first Australian record, and sole Australian specimen record to date, was obtained on North Stradbroke Island in July 1973. This is somewhat later than most records from Southport pelagic excursions, which cover all months between October and May, i.e. Austral spring and autumn (Palliser 2023; Walbridge *et al.* 2023).

The morphological differences between the four *Fregatta* Storm-petrels occurring in Australian waters are subtle, and care should be taken with their identification. Off Southport, the commonest species is the Black-bellied Storm-petrel (see above; Walbridge 2019), which lacks the streaks on the belly of the New Zealand and New Caledonian Storm-petrels, and often (but not always) has a black belly stripe (Plate 3). However, the White-bellied Storm-petrel *F. grallaria* (Plate 3) has also been recorded on sea mounts further out to sea. This species can be distinguished from the Black-bellied Storm-petrel by its sharply demarcated black bib, more extensive white on the underwing coverts, and shorter legs (N. Haass, *in litt.*).



**Plate 3.** Left, Black-bellied Storm-petrel, off Southport, South-east Qld, August 2014; right, pale morph White-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregatta grallaria*, Britannia Seamount, off South-east Qld/North-east NSW, March 2015 (Raja W. Stephenson).

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**Plate 4.** New Caledonian Storm-petrel, 2 April 2023, Britannia Seamount (Paul Walbridge).

