

Whitechinned Petrel

Bassiaan

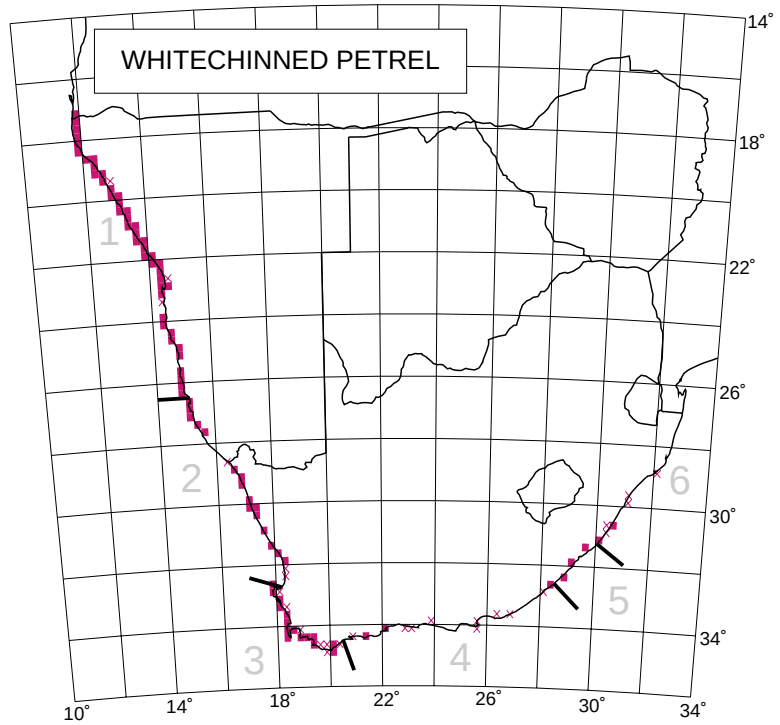
Procellaria aequinoctialis

The Whitechinned Petrel is a common nonbreeding visitor, found along the coast throughout the region. It is abundant off the south and west coasts, common off eastern South Africa, and regular in small numbers off southern Mozambique and Angola (Brooke 1981b; Brooke *et al.* 1981). It is the most ubiquitous procellariiform in the region, but is probably eclipsed in numbers by the Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*.

Most birds are of the nominate subspecies breeding at circumpolar subantarctic islands during the austral summer. Nonbreeding birds disperse throughout the Southern Ocean. The spectacled form, *P. a. conspicillata*, restricted as a breeding species to Inaccessible Island in the Tristan group, is a scarce visitor to the west coast of southern Africa, primarily in winter.

It occurs in both oceanic and shelf waters, but is more abundant in the latter, with the greatest concentrations occurring near the shelf-edge where trawling activity is greatest. It regularly occurs close inshore, and is the pelagic seabird most frequently observed from coastal promontories. In addition to feeding on pelagic fish, it attends trawlers where flocks of thousands may gather to scavenge fishery discards. The distribution off the west coast is largely determined by the dispersal of trawlers (Ryan & Moloney 1988). It is also attracted to other vessels, and will follow ships for hours.

It occurs throughout the year off the west and south coasts, but is more abundant during winter (Cooper & Dowle 1976; Liversidge & Le Gras 1981; Ryan & Rose 1989). The apparent difference in seasonality in atlas records between the northern and southern Benguela (coastal Zones 1 and 2) may merely reflect the time of most abundant onshore winds. Its occurrence is more seasonal off the east coast where most records are in late winter (June–October). This coincides with the movement of Pilchards *Sardinops ocellatus* along the coast of Transkei and southern KwaZulu-Natal (the ‘sardine run’), which is accompanied by large numbers of Cape Gannets *Morus capensis* and other pelagic piscivores. Two birds ringed as chicks on the Crozet Islands have been recovered in southern Africa (Morant *et al.* 1983).



Recorded in 104 grid cells, 2.3%
Total number of records: 909
Mean reporting rate for range: 5.6%

Large numbers of Whitechinned Petrels or ‘Bassiaan’ were killed for food by fishermen earlier this century. Broken-off wings washing up on beaches indicate that this practice has not completely ceased. It is also being killed in substantial numbers by experimental longline fisheries (Brothers 1991; Barnes 1995). An accurate baseline census and monitoring of population size of this, the largest of the burrowing petrels, is needed to assess the severity of these human impacts.

P.G. Ryan

