

A Possible Record of Hybridisation Between Pied *Haematopus longirostris* and Sooty Oystercatchers *H. fuliginosus* at Mud Islands, Victoria

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Summary

An oystercatcher with unusual plumage was observed at Mud Islands, Victoria, on 22 December 1997. Comparison of this bird with a nearby Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris* showed that it had features common to both Pied and Sooty *H. fuliginosus* Oystercatchers, and was possibly a hybrid between the two species. The possibility that the aberrant bird was a different species, such as a South Island Pied Oystercatcher *H. finschi* or a Variable Oystercatcher *H. unicolor* of New Zealand, are discussed, as is the possibility of polymorphism.

Introduction

Two possible records of mixed pairs of Sooty *Haematopus fuliginosus* and Pied Oystercatchers *H. longirostris* in Australia have been published (McGarvie & Templeton 1974, Hewish 1989). It has been speculated that, in Australia, Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers may interbreed, producing infertile hybrids (Simpson & Day 1986), but there is no supporting evidence. Aberrant plumages, which may indicate mixed parentage, have also been noted on several Pied Oystercatchers observed in Cockburn Sound, Western Australia (Johnstone & Storr 1998).

Eurasian Pied Oystercatchers *H. ostralegus* and African Black Oystercatchers *H. moquini* apparently do not interbreed where they occur together in South Africa and Namibia (A.J. Tree pers. comm.). In New Zealand, mixed pairs of South Island Pied Oystercatchers *H. finschi* and Variable Oystercatchers *H. unicolor* have been noted around Canterbury, and hybrid offspring have been recorded (T. Crocker pers. comm.). This appears to contradict earlier work which concluded that times of breeding and other limiting factors were likely to prevent hybridisation between oystercatchers in New Zealand (Baker 1977).

Observation

On 22 December 1997, during a visit to Mud Islands, in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, an aberrant oystercatcher was observed; it showed distinct characteristics of both Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers. The bird was first seen during a routine check for colour-bands, and was subsequently viewed by a number of other observers over the next hour, and again in later months, as it occupied a territory on Mud Islands during the 1998–1999 breeding season. It was still present in March 1999.

The aberrant bird was associating with a Pied Oystercatcher, allowing an excellent comparison of their plumages and the colour of their soft parts. The

body-length of the aberrant oystercatcher appeared to be slightly shorter, compared with the accompanying Pied Oystercatcher, but it was much more heavily built, in the style of a Sooty Oystercatcher. This, combined with shorter legs, gave it a stocky appearance.

The bill was bright red, in contrast with the orange-red of that of the Pied Oystercatcher, and was a similar colour to that of an adult Sooty Oystercatcher. The black on the neck and breast extended farther down the chest (almost to the mid-belly region) than on a Pied Oystercatcher. Individual black feathers were also present among the white feathers of the lower belly. The aberrant bird lacked the half collar-ring present on the Pied Oystercatcher. In flight, the rump appeared black or dark brown, instead of white, and the white wing-bar was greatly reduced when compared with a Pied Oystercatcher. The underwings were distinctly darker, off-white to mid-grey, rather than white with dark grey on the trailing-edges of the wings.

The Victorian Wader Studies Group (V.W.S.G.) has been colour-banding Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers in southern Victoria since 1989. Two colour-bands of the same colour above a metal band on one leg are combined with three colour-bands of different colours on the other leg to provide individual identification for each bird. The aberrant bird had two light-green bands above a metal band on its right tarsus (therefore, it was banded 8 km west of Queenscliff), and on its left tarsus was a single white band. The loss of the other colour-bands prevents determination of the individual's identity without its recapture.

Discussion

The possibility that this bird was a different species of oystercatcher was, at the time, considered very doubtful, but with the confirmed sighting of a South Island Pied Oystercatcher (SIPO) in Australia (Carter 1998, Totterman et al. 1999), it must now be taken into account. The other species that could possibly occur as a vagrant in Australia is the Variable Oystercatcher.

The SIPO can be discounted on the basis of the colour of the rump: the bird at Mud Islands had a black to dark-brown, rather than white, rump. In addition, the wing-bar of the SIPO is well marked, in contrast with the reduced wing-bar of the bird at Mud Islands. A comparison of photographs of the SIPO observed at Ballina, N.S.W. (Carter 1998), and field sketches from Mud Islands shows a superficial resemblance between the two birds. However, the bill of the oystercatcher at Mud Islands was shorter than on the SIPO (which was obviously long when observed in the field, and was about 28% longer than the bill of a Pied Oystercatcher – Carter 1998). In addition, the shorter legs of the SIPO at Ballina made the bird appear even stockier than the bird at Mud Islands.

The Variable Oystercatcher is more difficult to discount because it may exhibit a variety of plumages. However, the coloration of the soft parts of the bird at Mud Islands differed from that of the Variable Oystercatcher. The bill was bright red, whereas the bill of the Variable Oystercatcher is bright orange or red-orange, grading to orange or coral-pink towards the tip (Marchant & Higgins 1993). The bird at Mud Islands appeared more heavily built than a Variable Oystercatcher (though this is a subjective judgement). Although not conclusive, banding studies indicate that the Variable Oystercatcher is more sedentary than the SIPO (Marchant & Higgins 1993, T. Crocker pers. comm.), making the possibility of a vagrant Variable Oystercatcher unlikely. From the sedentary nature of the Variable

Oystercatcher, and the different colour of the bill and the overall build of the bird at Mud Islands, it is unlikely that it was a Variable Oystercatcher.

A bird considered to be an aberrant Pied Oystercatcher at Cockburn Sound in Western Australia (Johnstone & Storr 1998) appeared to have much longer legs than the bird at Mud Islands, but its plumage (including spots or streaking) was similar. However, the bird at Mud Islands had more extensive black on its chest, and its uppertail was darker than on the Western Australian bird. There was no explanation proffered for the aberrant plumage on the bird in Western Australia. Where Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers occur in north-western Australia, they infrequently mix in the same areas, even when in non-breeding flocks (PC, RJ pers. obs.); no birds with aberrant plumage have been observed there.

Occasional mixed pairs of Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers have been observed in Victoria over the past 20 years (CM pers. obs.), and there are reports dating back to the 1960s. A mixed pair of Sooty and Pied Oystercatchers held a territory on the south-western shore of Mud Islands for at least 10 years until the early 1990s, although the exact dates are not recorded (Marchant & Higgins 1993). The bird with aberrant plumage described in this paper may have been offspring from that pair.

Another mixed pair bred on the northern shore of Swan Island, at the mouth of Swan Bay, an embayment of Port Phillip Bay near Queenscliff, Vic., between 1991 and 1996. Eggs were recorded, but it is not known whether chicks hatched or were reared. During this period, a second mixed pair was seen on the eastern side of Swan Island. In the summer of 1997–1998, during an extensive survey of breeding Pied Oystercatchers, another mixed pair was found at the western end of Clonmel Island, in the Corner Inlet–Nooramunga National Park complex, in south-eastern Victoria (PC, CM pers. obs.).

In Victoria, the ranges of Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers overlap (Marchant & Higgins 1993), and the species sometimes form mixed non-breeding flocks. During banding activities by the V.W.S.G. over the last 20 years, mixed wintering flocks of Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers have been caught at roosts, where several of the Pied Oystercatchers have had some aberrant characteristics. These were generally in the form of a number of black feathers on the normally white rump, a reduced white wing-bar, or both. However, none has exhibited the degree of aberrance of the Mud Islands bird, which might not have had its current level of aberrant plumage when banded at Queenscliff. This raises the possibility that the 'hybrid' characteristics noted in adult birds may develop only after several seasons. This appears to be the case in New Zealand, where each hybrid chick appears similar to a SIPO but matures into an apparently large version of a Variable Oystercatcher (T. Crocker pers. comm.).

Conclusion

Without DNA testing, it is impossible to determine whether the bird seen at Mud Islands was a hybrid Pied \times Sooty Oystercatcher. However, circumstantial evidence from previous records of mixed pairs of oystercatchers, and its build similar to a Sooty Oystercatcher and plumage similar to the Pied Oystercatcher (but with some characteristics of the Sooty Oystercatcher) indicate a possible mixed parentage. The possibility of a vagrant species of oystercatcher being involved in this case appears low. Although polymorphism of the Pied Oystercatcher has been suggested as a possible explanation of the plumage observed, we feel that after

100 years of field observations of Pied Oystercatchers in Australia, more variation of plumage would have been reported if this were the case.

It will be interesting to see whether this 'hybrid' × Pied Oystercatcher pair survives and, if breeding occurs, whether it can successfully produce chicks.

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