

# FIRST VERIFIABLE RECORD OF THE FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER FOR MEXICO

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On 31 March 1996 we observed two Flesh-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus carneipes*) about 10 nautical miles west of Islas Los Coronados in northwestern Baja California, Mexico. The birds were seen about midday, during a pelagic birding trip arranged by the Cooper Ornithological Society. The skies were clear with a light wind, resulting in excellent viewing conditions. We watched the shearwaters carefully as they circled the boat several times over 15 minutes, and Radamaker made brief notes of the field marks.

The birds were similar in size and shape to nearby Pink-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus creatopus*) with a similar slow, languid wingbeat, quite different from the fast, stiff wing beats of numerous Sooty Shearwaters (*P. griseus*) also present. The Flesh-footed Shearwaters were distinguished from the Pink-footed by their uniform chocolate brown coloration and from the Sooty by their pale pink bills and feet, larger size, languid flight style, and dark underwings. If the Pink-footed has a dark morph, as implied by XXXX and reported by Steve N. G. Howell (pers. comm.) it is so rare the likelihood of two together is vanishingly small.

Knowing that the Flesh-footed Shearwater is rare in Mexico, Radamaker asked fellow birder Betty Siegel to take photographs of the shearwaters. She took several slides, but initially none appeared to support the identification conclusively. Nine years later, however, Radamaker had Larsen Photographic Labs convert the original slides to high-resolution digital images, and one of the converted images (Figure 1) appears sufficient to corroborate the identification of a Flesh-footed Shearwater—the first photographic record of the species for Mexico.

The Flesh-footed Shearwater is a transequatorial migrant in the Pacific and Indian oceans. During the austral summer the species is found primarily off Australia and New Zealand, and during the austral winter it disperses through much of the Indian Ocean and north into the Pacific Ocean, with some of the Pacific population moving east into waters off western North America (Marchant et al. 1990). Along the Pacific coast of North America the Flesh-footed Shearwater is uncommon but regular from the Gulf of Alaska south to northern California (American Ornithologists' Union 1998), and off southern California it is a very rare visitant from April to late November, accidental in midwinter (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In San Diego County it is very rare, with 11 records between 9 April (1996) and 9 September (1972), aside from an unseasonal record from La Jolla on 13 February 2001 (Unitt 2004).

The Flesh-footed Shearwater's distribution in Mexico is unclear. Pitman (1986) mapped approximately a dozen sightings from waters off the Baja California Peninsula and the Mexican mainland south to the vicinity of Islas Revillagigedo, but no specific

dates or species accounts accompany the data. Pitman's work formed the basis of the status and distribution described by Howell and Webb (1995), but Howell et al. (2001) considered the species to be of hypothetical occurrence in waters off the Baja California Peninsula, citing a lack of specific documented reports.

Photographic confirmation of the Flesh-footed Shearwater in Mexico was not surprising, considering its status in adjacent southern California and the several reliable sight reports from Mexico, including two recent ones from Baja California: one between Islas San Benitos and Isla Cedros on 2 May 2001, and three offshore south of Ensenada on 20 May 2001 (S. Wolfe *vide* Richard Erickson). Still, the true status and distribution of the Flesh-footed Shearwater in Mexico remain uncertain, and future sightings should be documented carefully.

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Figure 1. Flesh-footed Shearwater ~10 nautical miles west of Islas Los Coronados on 31 March 1996. Note the long, flesh-colored bill with dark tip and the bird's overall dark brown coloration.

*Photo by Betty Siegel*