

## The Seafarers' Friend.

In April 1946 the 10,000 ton Empire Victory type "GOOD HOPE CASTLE" was on passage from Trinidad to Capetown and the two Cadets ( of which I was one) were on daywork - chipping, red-leading and repainting the outboard weather-deck scuppers, from forward to aft, port and starboard. We sat on boxes, facing the guard-rails, gazing at a tranquil ocean where nothing seemed to happen other than an occasional flying fish. THEN, one afternoon, as we were enjoying the cooling trade wind, "Rocky" (my fellow Cadet) suddenly exclaimed " Hey ...look at that - we have company" and I immediately saw a huge bird gliding effortlessly alongside the ship. We both recognised it as an albatross and this was borne out by the Boatswain — Charley Thornback — who had come to check our work output. Mr. Thornback was one of the most senior Boatswains in the company but his lack of "social graces" and a tendency to use "strong" language when provoked precluded his appointment to a passenger mailship. The bird maintained its position alongside us with only an occasional movement of its huge wings ....then ...after scrutinising us for about five minutes ..it glided down towards the sea and immediately soared up and up until it fell astern. As we continued chipping, our new friend took up a position astern and weaved and glided with very little wing movement.

Seven o'clock next morning saw us resume our chipping and painting and, almost immediately, the albatross appeared alongside us, and after a few minutes scrutiny, took up its position astern and spent the day gliding ahead of the ship, then dropping astern and all with very little wing movement. This carried on for some five to six days but then - two days before we arrived in Capetown — it disappeared, and we could concentrate on finishing our tedious task. It had aroused great interest aboard the ship and many stories of similar sightings were recalled by the Officers during mealtimes. The ship had accommodation for twelve passengers (and sometimes more if the DEMS accommodation was used) and they too took numerous photographs and asked many questions.

A few hours after arrival Capetown the Port Meteorological Officer boarded and I was instructed to show him our meteorological logbooks ( we were an "Observing Vessel") and I told him of our experience with our albatross — and the interest that its apparently effortless flight had engendered aboard the ship. It was soon apparent that he knew a very great deal about these creatures and was more than happy to talk about them.

Much of what follows comes from the rough notes I made during our long conversation and which I unearthed a few weeks ago when rummaging in the loft, supplemented by a more recent reference to the reliable "Google"!

The wandering albatross has a body length of about 53 inches and an average weight of some 20 lbs. Seagulls rarely tip the scales at more than 2 lbs. Nautical history indicates that the bird was almost sacred and, in later years, no seafarer would ever kill one deliberately and the killing of one began the unhappy train of events in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". The bird has a prodigious appetite and is always hungry to such an extent that it will invariably grab a bit of meat or bread tied to the end of a line .If this results in it landing on the deck of a ship it is invariable "seasick" and will divest the contents of its stomach on its new surroundings. Once on deck and without wind below them to afford "lift off" they are unable to take off — and such is the strength of their wings that anyone attempting to assist them risked serious injury. The birds seek the land only during the breeding season and then chiefly on the isolated islands of the Southern Ocean.

It is not uncommon for an albatross to follow a steamship for some two thousand miles -and one was recorded as having "tailed" a fast steamer for three thousand miles and another for six consecutive days without a break. During that time it was seen to fly constantly during the hours of daylight, and the Watchkeepers reported occasional sighting during the hours of darkness suggesting that it did not sleep by alighting on the water. Seafarers have long been fascinated by the sight of an albatross following in the wake of their ship at the same distance and at the same height,with only an occasional wing movement, day in day out. Initially the scientists of that era declared that the bird was held in the air by the energy drawn from the ship's engines. Behind every fast steamship there is a "funnel" of moving air and one wrote " The lazy bird poises itself on the peak of this funnel and allows itself to be pulled along — like a boy hanging on the back of a lorry"! Some years later it was thought that their amazing stamina could be attributed to the birds use of "dynamic soaring" and "slope soaring" to cover great distances with very little physical exertion, (aided by their immense wingspan which can reach 15 feet). Dynamic soaring involves repeatedly rising into wind and descending downwind (gaining energy from the vertical wind gradient) with energy used only in the top and bottom turns of every loop. It has been calculated this allows flight of about 1000 kilometres a day without a flap of the wings ! Slope soaring uses the rising air on the windward side of large waves which, combined with their high glide ratios, means that every metre they drop they can then travel forward for 22 metres. Their soaring is aided by a shoulder lock - a tendon that locks the wing when fully extended



Photo from Wikipedia,  
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thus not necessitating any muscular expenditure. They combine these techniques with the use of predictable weather systems. The birds in the Southern Hemisphere flying North will adopt a clockwise route and those flying South will fly counterclockwise. They rest on the water (in calm seas) until the wind picks up allowing them to take off without too much exertion. Some use a technique called flap-gliding where the bird progresses using bursts of flapping followed by gliding.

They are to be found mainly in the Southern Hemisphere (Antarctica, Australia, S.Africa and S.America) and in the North Pacific from Hawaii to Japan, California and Alaska. They avoid the Doldrums as these areas would entail sustained "flapping" and energy expenditure. There is one exception to this and the "Waved Albatross" inhabits the equatorial waters around the Galapagos Islands because of the cool waters of the Humboldt Current and the resulting winds. There is evidence that they once lived in the North Atlantic and some attribute their disappearance to the rising sea levels resulting from interglacial warming.

Wandering albatross react strongly to bathymetry, feeding only in waters deeper than one thousand metres and scientists have been astounded by their rigid adherence to this with one remarking "They appear to have their own "No Entry" signs.! Until recently it was thought that they were solely "surface feeders" but more detailed studies revealed that some species can dive to a depth of 12.5 m. in search of refreshment. These amazing birds live much longer than other birds and delay breeding for longer, reaching sexual maturity slowly and can delay breeding for up to ten years thereafter. The birds are "colonial" usually nesting on isolated islands and then returning to their own point of origin to breed. Most species survive for more than 50 years but one was recorded as having a lifespan of some 66 years.

Undoubtedly these remarkable creatures will continue to entertain and intrigue those who cross the oceans of the globe and, no doubt, more of their secrets will be revealed.

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