

## A MOTTLED PETREL IN THE NORTHERN GULF OF CALIFORNIA—MEXICO'S FIRST RECORD

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**ABSTRACT:** A Mottled Petrel (*Pterodroma inexpectata*) seen and photographed at a distance off San Felipe in the Gulf of California on 15 May 2024 represents a first of its species to be noted in Mexico. On its passage north the Mottled Petrel, a transequatorial migrant, crosses the central Pacific mainly in March and April, suggesting that the bird seen off San Felipe in May could have been trapped and delayed in the Gulf of California while heading north, albeit far to the east of its normal route.

On 15 May 2024, Pitman, Breese, and Hoefer observed a Mottled Petrel (*Pterodroma inexpectata*) approximately 28 km east of San Felipe, Baja California, in the extreme northern Gulf of California, at position 31° 01' N, 114° 32' W. It represents the first record for Mexico and its territorial waters. The bird was seen from the Sea Shepherd research vessel *Seahorse* during a survey for the Vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), a critically endangered porpoise.

Pitman wrote the following description one week after the sighting: “The bird was observed with mounted, 25 × 150 mm ‘big eye’ binoculars as it crossed our bow [at 07:48], perhaps 250 m out. At that distance, the bird was almost full frame in my view. It was approximately the size of a Heermann’s Gull (*Larus heermanni*); the head was dark with a sharply contrasting white forehead and a short, stout, black beak. The underwing was white but with a thick black carpal bar. The underparts were all white except for a large dark patch on the belly and lower chest. I have seen scores of these in the North Pacific and probably several thousand south of New Zealand in Antarctic waters. A behavioral note: this bird towers higher than any other seabird in the North Pacific (in my experience), but on this windless day flew about 30 m above the water, parallel to the water surface, rather like a gull!”

Hoefer added, “I saw clearly through the bigeye binoculars a fairly heavy *Pterodroma* petrel somewhat large headed with a short, thick bill and very distinctive ventral coloration. The belly blotch seemed a very dark gray, due to the sun angle. But it was very extensive, covering all but a small pale chin area and the undertail coverts. The underwing pattern seemed typical, but I couldn’t see it well. The bird was flying steadily to the SE about 10–15 m high.”

Juan Carlos Salinas obtained one distant photograph of the bird (Figure 1). After we sent it to him, Peter Pyle (pers. comm.) wrote that “the photo shows a large-headed *Pterodroma* that is entirely consistent with the Mottled Petrel, but does not rule out all other *Pterodroma* species. In this regard the photo does indeed support the diagnostic identification based on the written descriptions.” We concur with this analysis.

The Mottled Petrel is a transequatorial migrant and the most widespread *Pterodroma* in the Pacific Ocean. It nests in New Zealand and forages south to Antarctic waters during the breeding season; it then moves into the North Pacific and Bering Sea for the boreal summer (Carboneras et al. 2020). It migrates regularly

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through Hawaiian waters during restricted intervals from March to April and late September to November (Pyle and Pyle 2017). It has been recorded many times off the contiguous western United States and occasionally between there and Hawaii (<https://eBird.org>, L. T. Ballance et al. unpubl. data), including at least 10 times in U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone waters far off southern California, as far south as 30° 51' N (CBRC 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2025). Records closest to Mexico, off southern California and midway toward Hawaii, are primarily from November and December, but also from October and April (CBRC 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2025, <https://eBird.org>). Pitman (1986) summarized results of extensive seabird surveys conducted in the eastern tropical Pacific (1974–1984, primarily during the months from January through March). During those surveys and others of the eastern and central tropical Pacific and California Current (1988–2019, primarily during the months of July through November; L. T. Ballance et al. unpubl. data), the Mottled Petrel was recorded north of the equator and east of 120° W only once, at a location >926 km south-southwest of the tip of the Baja California Peninsula.

The San Felipe petrel was clearly far out of its normal range, as most of the Mottled Petrel population has already reached the Bering Sea or is still moving north through the central Pacific in May (Ainley and Manolis 1979, Howell 2012, Carboneras et al. 2020, <https://eBird.org>), although there are a few records from California in April and May. The simplest explanation for the occurrence of the Mottled Petrel near San Felipe is that it became trapped in the Gulf of California during its northward migration. Also, in discussing the occurrence of vagrant procellariiforms at the Salton Sea and elsewhere in the southwestern United States, Patten and Minnich (1997) and Patten and McCaskie (2004) noted that southerly monsoonal winds in the Gulf of California typically begin to develop during May.

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FIGURE 1. Distant photo of a Mottled Petrel in the northern Gulf of California off San Felipe, Baja California, 15 May 2024.

*Photo by Juan Carlos Salinas*

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