

Vagrant Antarctic fur seals at the Tristan da Cunha Islands

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Abstract

Antarctic fur seals *Arctocephalus gazella* mainly breed at islands south of the Antarctic Polar Front, but stragglers occasionally occur farther north, with records from Gough Island (40°S, 10°W) in the central South Atlantic Ocean in October/November 2005 and September/October 2009. We report the first record from Tristan da Cunha (37°S, 12°W) in September 2013, and another individual that was observed at Gough Island. Both individuals were lean, lethargic subadult males that were present before the onset of the breeding (pupping) season of the resident populations of Subantarctic fur seals *A. tropicalis*.

Keywords: Antarctic fur seals, Tristan da Cunha Islands, Subantarctic fur seals, Southern Ocean

Antarctic fur seals *Arctocephalus gazella* mainly breed at localities south of the Antarctic Polar Front, but have successfully colonised some sub-Antarctic islands north of this Front (Condy 1978; Bester 1984), where they are largely replaced by the Subantarctic fur seal *A. tropicalis*. Vagrant Antarctic fur seals occasionally occur farther north (Acevedo et al. 2011), reaching Gough Island (40°S, 10°W) in the central South Atlantic Ocean (Wilson et al. 2005; Bester and Reisinger 2010), and we report a further range extension in this region.

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From 13 to 19 September 2013 the only breeding colony of *A. tropicalis* at The Caves (37°09'S, 12°10'W), Tristan da Cunha Island (Bester and Ryan 2007), in the southern Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 1) was searched daily for lactating females for satellite transmitter deployment. One *A. gazella* was located on a partly vegetated beach of rounded stones within ~300 m of the small (~30 pups) *A. tropicalis* breeding colony on 16 September, but could not be located the next day. The two species were separated on vocal (St. Clair Hill et al. 2001) and external morphological (Condy 1978) characteristics. The lethargic, lean, subadult male was largely unresponsive to very close approaches (one metre) to ascertain its sex, and to estimate its body length (nose to tail) by placing a rope of known length parallel to the long axis of its body. The 1.2 m animal was not obviously injured, but appeared fatigued and in poor condition with ribs showing (Fig. 2a). Alerted to the presence of the vagrant at Tristan da Cunha (TdC), a search was initiated on the beaches close to the Meteorological Station on Gough Island (40°20'S, 09°54'W) to the southeast of TdC (Fig. 1), and located another lean, lethargic, ~1.2 m long subadult male *A. gazella* hauled out on 21 September 2013 (Fig. 2b). Despite the 5-day lapse between the sightings at TdC and 380 km distant Gough Island (GI), where it was seen in the same area as previous sightings (Wilson et al. 2006; Bester and Reisinger 2010), it is impossible to say whether it is the same animal.

The sightings of Antarctic fur seals at Gough Island, the stronghold of *A. tropicalis* worldwide (Bester 1987; Bester and Ryan 2007), and the new sighting at Tristan, suggest that extralimital visits of *A. gazella* to the Tristan islands are now unexceptional. Moreover, the poor body condition and general lethargy of the individuals likely indicate that they are vagrants that made a fortuitous landfall to rest outside of their usual foraging range (Wilson et al. 2006; Bester and Reisinger 2010; this study). Vagrant *A. gazella* have been recorded at a number of localities around the Southern Ocean (Acevedo et al. 2011), but the Tristan sighting represents the northernmost oceanic island record for the species, although more northerly records (33°08'S) of this species from mainland Brazil (Cherem et al. 2004) exist.

Such records suggest that *A. gazella* disperse from their breeding localities as populations recover after large-scale sealing of the 19th and early 20th century ceased (Wilson et al. 2006 and references therein). Hybridization between the two species at

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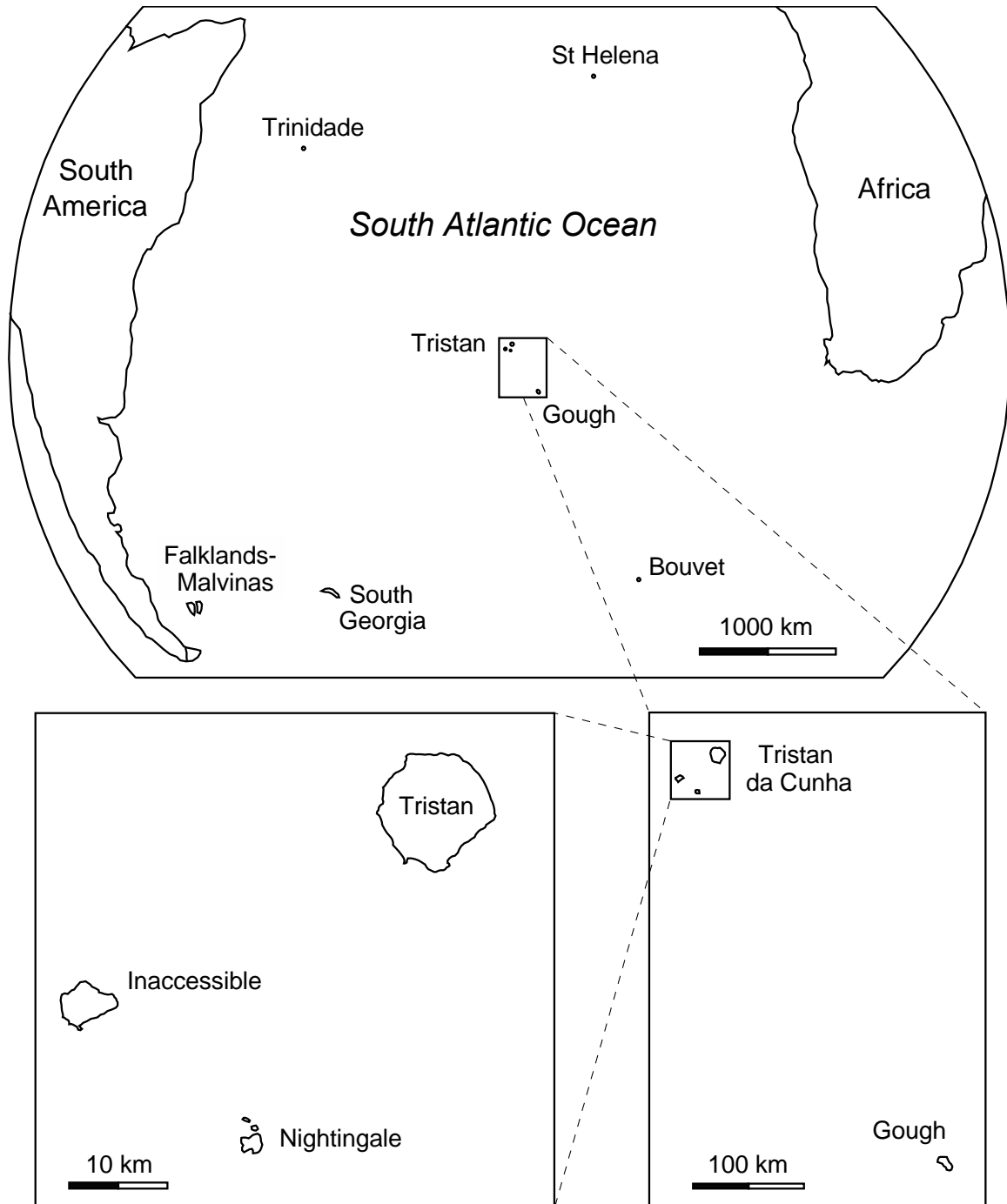


Fig. 1 Location of Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island, South Atlantic Ocean, where the vagrant Antarctic fur seals were sighted.

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(a)



(b)



Fig. 2 Antarctic fur seals seen at Tristan da Cunha (a) and Gough Island (b) in September 2013 (photographs MN Bester and PG Ryan).

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Gough Island is unlikely (Wilson et al. 2006) and of limited impact due to the very large *A. tropicalis* population. However, the probable arrival of adult male *A. gazella* (Bester & Reisinger 2010) at the small Tristan colony of *A. tropicalis* during the breeding season could conceivably result in hybridization akin to what has happened at, e.g., Marion Island (Condy 1978).

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