

**RECORDS OF THE SUBANTARCTIC FUR SEAL *ARCTOCEPHALUS TROPICALIS*
FROM RODRIGUES AND MAURITIUS, INDIAN OCEAN**

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A juvenile Subantarctic fur seal *Arctocephalus tropicalis* was recorded on the Indian Ocean island of Rodrigues and two were seen on Mauritius. These records are at least 2 500 km from the closest breeding colony (Amsterdam Island) and are the most easterly by some 1 800 km of all previous records of vagrants of this species.

Key words: *Arctocephalus tropicalis*, Indian Ocean, Mauritius, new record, Rodrigues, Subantarctic fur seal

On the morning of 11 July 2001, a small seal was discovered by a local inhabitant at Petite Butte on the small Indian Ocean island of Rodrigues (18 × 8 km; 19°43'S, 63°38'E), approximately 560 km east of Mauritius. The seal was initially found about 10 m

from the beach, on a small bank among *Casuarina* trees. It then moved down onto the beach, where it lay for over an hour, in the heat of the day, shaded only by a rock overhang. The seal was later coaxed back into the lagoon. It did not appear to be injured and soon



Fig. 1 The juvenile Subantarctic fur seal seen on Rodrigues

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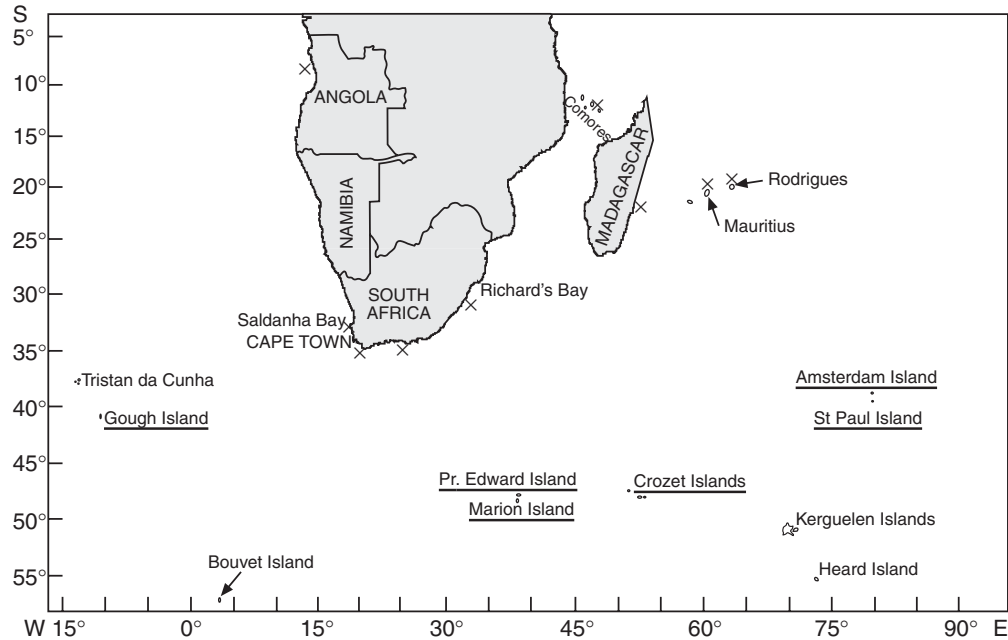


Fig.2 Map showing the closest breeding sites (underlined) of *A. tropicalis* to Rodrigues Island and Mauritius, where the vagrant seals were found. The symbol \times indicates sightings of vagrants

swam away.

Early the following morning the same seal was discovered on some rocks at the south-east end of the island. It was captured in a basket and released back into the lagoon. At about 12:30 it made its way down through a large natural channel (Grande Passe) out of the lagoon and was not seen again.

A video recording of the seal was taken on the first day and it was identified as a juvenile Subantarctic fur seal *Arctocephalus tropicalis* by its small size, creamy white face, throat and chest, and long vibrissae (Fig. 1). Its sex is unknown, but males are more common; Shaughnessy and Ross (1980) documented 16 of 22 *A. tropicalis* strandings in southern Africa as being males.

Shortly after this event, two small seals were captured on the island of Mauritius and kept at the Albion Fisheries Research Centre at Petite Rivière Noire in South-East Mauritius (20°30'S, 57°30'E; Fig. 2), where they were also identified as *A. tropicalis*. The smaller of the two, a male, was caught in late July 2001 weighing 6.5 kg. It was transferred by air to the East London Aquarium, South Africa, on 24 August 2001, where on 5 February 2003 it was in good health and weighed 26.5 kg. The larger (sex unknown) was caught on 31 July 2001 weighing 10 kg. This animal had a wound on its back and died in Mauritius on 16

August 2001. It is doubtful whether the smaller animal was the same one that hauled out in Rodrigues.

This is another interesting record of vagrant Subantarctic fur seals in the tropics, far from their natal colony. Other examples of extralimital tropical records include two adult males found on the coast of Angola at 9°20'S (Carr *et al.* 1985) and an immature male and female on the coast of Brazil at 9°40'S and 12°54'S respectively (Neves *et al.* 1990, Pinedo 1990). In the Indian Ocean, a juvenile was found at the Comores at 12°30'S, 44°30'E (David *et al.* 1993), and a juvenile on the east coast of Madagascar at 22°08'S, 48°01'E (Garrigue and Ross 1996). The present record on Rodrigues is the most easterly of these by some 1 800 km. The farthest east that this species has been recorded is on Macquarie Island (159°E; Shaughnessy *et al.* 1988, Goldsworthy 1999) and the South Island of New Zealand (Csordas 1962). All the Indian Ocean sightings were in the winter period of July and August, identified by Shaughnessy and Ross (1980) as the period of most strandings in southern Africa (19 of 22 records were from May to September).

The closest breeding colonies of *A. tropicalis* to Rodrigues are on Amsterdam and St Paul islands, the Iles Crozet and Marion and Prince Edward islands (Fig. 2). In theory, it might have come from any of

these, but Amsterdam Island is the closest by a considerable margin, being about 2 500 km from Rodrigues compared with about 3 200 km from Iles Crozet and farther from the others. Garrigue and Ross (1996) studied the Indian Ocean current systems and concluded that a seal from Amsterdam Island would be more likely to reach Madagascar from the north than from the south, by utilizing the northward flow of the South Indian Ocean Current and the westward flow of the South Equatorial Current. The same line of reasoning could be used for a seal to reach Rodrigues or Mauritius, making Amsterdam Island the most likely source of these animals (Garrigue and Ross 1996). Seals from Marion Island can reach South Africa; a female tagged as a pup at Marion Island was found dead at Saldanha Bay in September 1984, when almost two years of age (Bester 1989). In this context, it may be relevant that the population of *A. tropicalis* has been increasing in recent years and that there may therefore be a greater likelihood of stray animals being found far from their natal colonies (Kerley 1987, Roux 1987, Hofmeyr *et al.* 1997).

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