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STATUS REPORT ON THE BLACK-CAPPED PETREL (*PTERODROMA HASITATA*)

to

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Atlanta, GA USA

31 December 2006

by

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CHAPTER 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata)* was thought to be very near extinction throughout much of the twentieth century, and is the only extant gadfly petrel known to breed in the Caribbean Basin. The Black-capped Petrel population may number as low as 2,000 and no more than 20,000 pairs (Wingate 1964), and suffers combined threats of habitat loss, harvesting by humans, and predation by introduced mammals (Lee and Vina 1993, Simons et al. 2002, Rimmer et al. 2006). The exact sizes, locations, and detailed chronologies of all Black-capped Petrel breeding sites remain poorly-studied, although colonies are likely restricted to steep sea and inland cliffs along the La Selle Ridge in Hispanolia (Wingate 1964, Lee 1979, Lee 1984, Haney 1987, Lee and Vina 1993). Based on Wingate's (1964) and our current efforts, the largest breeding population likely still occurs in Haiti, although there is renewed discussion about a possible breeding site in Cuba in the Sierra Maestra mountain range.

All evidence at present indicates that waters in or adjacent to the Gulf Stream between north Florida and southern Virginia provide for the primary non-breeding range of Black-capped Petrels. Concentrations of birds can be found along the Gulf Stream in U.S. waters throughout the year, but particularly in May, August, and late December through early January. The main foraging area appears to be along the Gulf Stream directly east of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, North Carolina. Concentrations occurring during winter, when peak breeding activity is underway, is suggestive of breeding birds foraging along the Gulf Stream moving to and from breeding colonies

(Lee 1987). These long-distance foraging bouts, if verified, would not be unreasonable for species of the Genus *Pterodroma*.

Potential threats to both Black-capped and Bermuda Petrels include human encroachment at breeding sites and offshore oil and gas exploration at Gulf Stream foraging sites. Increased mercury levels associated with oil spills poses a potential threat, as the Black-capped Petrel seems to be highly susceptible to mercury bioaccumulation compared to other pelagic species (Whaling and Lee 1982). In addition, fires and other light sources are known to attract Black-capped Petrels (Wingate 1964), making collisions with wires and other structures on lighted ships and platforms a potential concern. Because of the Haitian social-economic instability and increased habitat loss, it is not unreasonable to assume further declines to the global populations and thus greater vulnerability of the species to extinction.

This summary is an effort to combine all recent accounts of Black-capped Petrel activity at breeding and non-breeding locations in the Caribbean. Chapter 2 is a previously unpublished species account of the Black-capped Petrel that was prepared by David Lee and Chris Haney in the late 1990s. It provides a detailed literature review, including information on the species' systematics, description, historical and recent nesting and at sea distribution and behavior, population estimates, and discussion of conservation concerns. Chapter 3 describes colony surveys conducted at Sierra de Baoruco, Dominican Republic, in January 2002 by Ted Simons, Jaime Collazo, and John Gerwin. Chapters 4 and 5 are reprints of reports prepared by Chris Rimmer and associates of field research conducted at La Visite National Park and Macaya Biosphere Reserve, Haiti in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The reports from Haiti include

information on both Black-capped Petrels and other avian species of concern (e.g., Bicknell's Thrush, *Catharus Bicknell*), and prioritizes conservation concerns for this area. Chapter 6 describes all additional sightings of Black-capped Petrels in recent years (including at sea sightings off Cape Hatteras, N.C. by Brian Patteson), the evidence for a breeding colony in Cuba, and recommendations for future research and conservation efforts.