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A vagrant Subantarctic fur seal *Arctocephalus tropicalis* found in the Comores

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A juvenile Subantarctic fur seal, *Arctocephalus tropicalis* was caught near the island of Anjouan, Comores, about 500 km off the east coast of Africa, on 20 August 1990. This record represents a northerly extension by some 1800 km of the recorded east coast range. The breeding colonies of this species are on temperate islands north of the Antarctic Polar Front. The closest colonies are on Amsterdam Island and the Prince Edward islands, nearly 4000 km south-west and south, respectively of this sighting.

'n Onvolwasse Subantarkiese pelsrob, *Arctocephalus tropicalis*, is op 20 Augustus 1990 op die eiland van Anjouan, sowat 500 km van die ooskus van Afrika af, gevang. Met hierdie waarneming word die voorheen opgetekende ooskus-verspreidingsgebied, met ongeveer 1800 km noordwaarts uitgebrei. Die teelkolonies van hierdie spesie is op gematigde eilande noord van die Antarktiese Poolfront. Die naaste kolonies is by Amsterdam- en die Prins Edward-eilande, amper 4000 km onderskeidelik suidwes en suid van hierdie waarneming.

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On 20 August 1990, a seal was caught by fishermen near the village of Vassi, on the south-west coast of Anjouan Island (12°30'S / 44°30'E), Comores, about 500 km off the east

coast of Africa. It was transported from there, still alive, to the capital, Mutsamudu, where it was put on display. Local people had apparently never seen a seal before and crowds gathered to view the 'monster'. Later the same day the animal was killed and was preserved in a domestic freezer, owing to lack of other facilities. Some photographs of the animal were taken after death. From the buff-coloured muzzle, chest and throat shown in the photograph (Figure 1), it seems clear that the seal was a Subantarctic fur seal *Arctocephalus tropicalis*. Its sex is unknown but it is more likely to have been male, since Shaughnessy & Ross (1980) found that 16 out of 22 (73%), *A. tropicalis* strandings in southern Africa were males. From the estimate of body weight made after death (24 kg), the animal was likely to be a juvenile. The specimen was apparently thrown away before any arrangements to preserve it could be made.

This represents another interesting record of an individual *A. tropicalis* occurring far from the nearest known colony. A previous example of this was the sighting of two adult males on the African west coast, at the mouth of the Kwanza River, Angola (9°20'S / 13°09'E) on 2 October 1983 (Carr, Carr & David 1985), about 2700 km north of any previous west coast sighting.

Records of 22 vagrant Subantarctic fur seals that beached themselves around the coast of southern Africa between 1966 and 1979 show that the most northerly sighting was at Richard's Bay (28°47'S / 32°05'E) on the east coast in 1977 (Shaughnessy & Ross 1980). Therefore, the present record represents a northward extension of the recorded east coast range by about 1800 km. The timing of the sighting (August) also falls within the winter period identified by Shaughnessy & Ross (1980) as that during which most strandings occurred in southern Africa. They found that 19 of the 22 records occurred from May through September.

The breeding sites of *A. tropicalis* are situated on temperate islands north of the Antarctic Polar Front: the largest colony is on Gough Island, with other large colonies on



Figure 1 The subantarctic fur seal lying in the bottom of a dugout canoe on Anjouan Island. Note the pieces of bread with which it had apparently been fed.

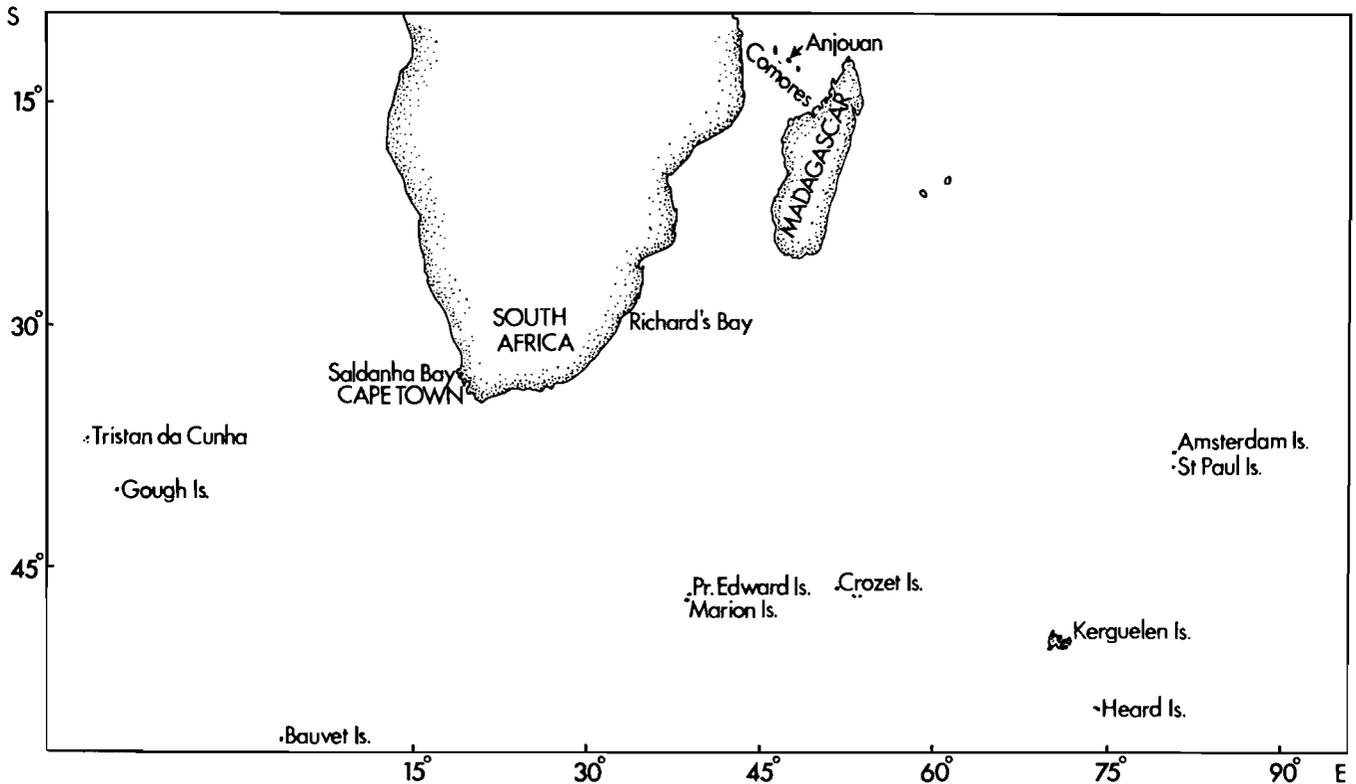


Figure 2 Map showing the breeding sites of *A. tropicalis* and the Comores Islands where the vagrant was found.

Amsterdam, Marion and Prince Edward Islands and small breeding colonies on Tristan da Cunha, Ile St Paul and Iles Crozet (Bester 1984, 1990; Kerley 1987; Roux 1987). Of these, Amsterdam Island (37°50'S / 77°35'E) and the Prince Edward Islands (46°54'S / 37°45'E) are the closest to Anjouan Island (nearly 4000 km to the north-east and north respectively) and both have populations of over 35 000 *A. tropicalis* (Roux 1987; Kerley 1987). The population at Iles Crozet (46°S / 51°E) is much smaller, (about 350 animals in 1984, Roux 1987). The straggler could have come from any of these, but the route through the Mozambique Channel from Marion Island would appear to be more direct than that around Madagascar, which would have to be negotiated by a seal from Amsterdam Island (Figure 2). The seal's route could be influenced by the southward flowing Mozambique current. Evidence that seals from Marion Island can reach South Africa is supplied by the fact that a female *A. tropicalis*, which was tagged as a pup on Marion Island, was recovered dead at Saldanha Bay (33°S / 18°E) in September 1984, when it was almost two years old (Bester 1989).

This species was hunted to the verge of extinction in the 19th century and has made a strong recovery since then, exhibiting high annual population growth rates (Bester 1984, 1990; Kerley 1987; Roux 1987; Wilkinson & Bester 1990). The expanding size of the population may help to explain the occurrence of vagrants far from their natal colonies.

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