

# Vagrant Subantarctic fur seal on the coast of Tanzania

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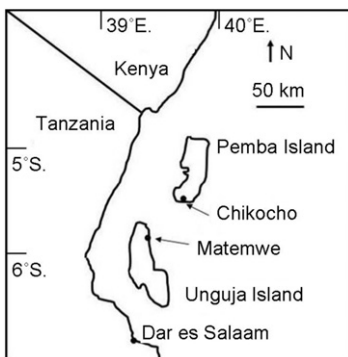
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An immature Subantarctic fur seal was sighted on Unguja Island, Zanzibar, Tanzania, in 2008. This is the most northerly record of a vagrant of this species. The nearest breeding colony is on the Prince Edward Islands, 4500 km distant. While it is likely that this is the natal site of the vagrant due to its proximity and population size, the actual location of origin is unknown. This is the second fur seal sighted in this area. A fur seal of unknown species was sighted on Pemba Island, 30 km north of the Unguja Island, in 2002. While the species of the latter animal could not be determined, it is likely also a Subantarctic fur seal.

**Key words:** *Arctocephalus tropicalis*, distribution, vagrancy, Zanzibar.

A Subantarctic fur seal, *Arctocephalus tropicalis*, was sighted on Unguja (or Zanzibar) Island in the Zanzibar Archipelago, Tanzania (Fig. 1). It was first seen ashore at Gwede Beach (5°52'S, 39°21'E), near Matemwe on 27 June 2008. Two artisanal fishermen observed it being chased into the sea by dogs, whereafter they captured it from a fishing vessel. The owner of a local hotel contacted one of

us (O.A.A.) who examined the animal the same day. The animal died two days later. The animal (Fig. 2) was approximately 0.85 m long, weighed approximately 10 kg and had a wound of unknown origin on its chest. It was identified from photographs by one of us (G.J.G.H.) as being a Subantarctic fur seal based on a combination of the characteristic colouration of the pelage, the head

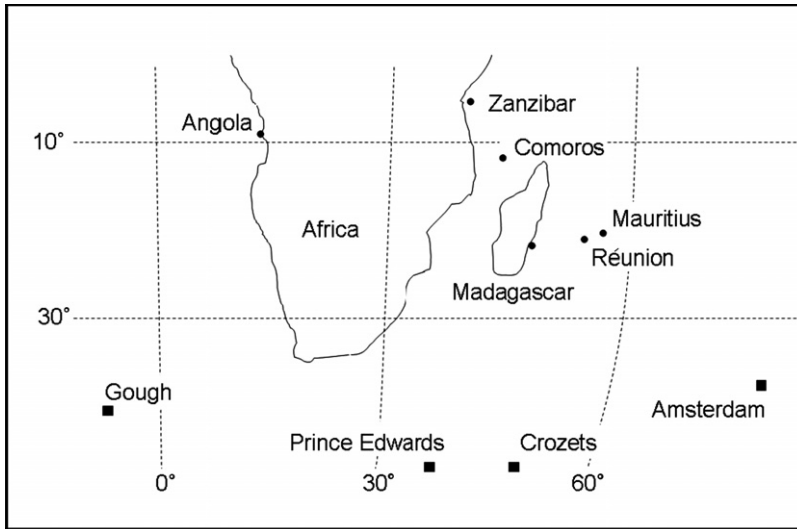


**Fig. 1.** Locations of confirmed (Matemwe) and suspected (Chokocho) strandings of vagrant Subantarctic fur seals (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*) in the Zanzibar Archipelago.



**Fig. 2. a, b.** Vagrant Subantarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*) from Unguja Island, Zanzibar. Photographs: O.A. Amir

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**Fig. 3.** Map showing location of sites mentioned in the text. Squares indicate Subantarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*) breeding colonies while circles indicate the location of selected recorded vagrants.

shape and the relatively large eye size (Condy 1978; Laws 1993).

This is not the first fur seal sighted in the Zanzibar Archipelago. In July 2002 a seal was recorded near Chokocho Village, Pemba Island ( $5^{\circ}29'S$ ,  $39^{\circ}38'E$ ). It was caught on a handline by artisanal fishermen and was killed shortly afterwards. One of us (O.A.A.) examined a video tape of the carcass and recognized it as a fur seal from a published description (Jefferson *et al.* 1993). Since no records of vagrants from other species of fur seals in the tropical Indian Ocean could be found in the literature, and since Subantarctic fur seals are commonly recorded vagrants (Shaughnessy & Ross 1980; Pinedo 1988; Gales *et al.* 1992; Mawson & Coughran 1999), we suggest that this animal might also be a Subantarctic fur seal.

The record from Unguja Island is the most northerly of a confirmed Subantarctic fur seal. The previous most northerly records of this species are  $9^{\circ}20'S$ , for an adult male seen on the coast of Angola (Carr *et al.* 1985),  $9^{\circ}40'S$  for an individual sighted on the coast of Brazil (Pinedo 1988),  $12^{\circ}30'S$  for an immature animal seen at the Îles Comores (David *et al.* 1993) and  $18^{\circ}42'S$  for an individual from the coast of Western Australia (Gales *et al.* 1992). Matemwe is some 370 km further north than the Angolan sighting, and Chokocho is 30 km further north still. Both locations are within 650 km of the Equator.

A number of vagrant Subantarctic fur seals have been recorded in the tropical and subtropical

western Indian Ocean in addition to the sighting from the Comores (David *et al.* 1993). Animals have also been seen on the islands of Madagascar (Garrigue & Ross 1996), Mauritius and Rodrigues (David & Salmon 2003). The sources of these animals are possibly related to the proximity of breeding colonies, the abundance of animals at those colonies and prevailing currents. The closest breeding colonies are three groups of islands in the Southern Ocean that lie some 4500–5200 km distant (Fig. 3) and it has been suggested that these are likely sites of origin (David *et al.* 1993; Garrigue & Ross 1996; David & Salmon 2003). While the Prince Edward Islands supports approximately 30% of global pup production (Bester *et al.* 2003; Hofmeyr *et al.* 2006), and Île Amsterdam supports approximately 10% (Guinet *et al.* 1994), the contribution of the third site, the Îles Crozet is minimal (Guinet *et al.* 1994). Subantarctic fur seals, however, may travel far further than this with distances of some 18 000 km recorded (Torres & Aguayo 1984). Furthermore, Wynen *et al.* (2000) and Ferreira *et al.* (2008) showed that Subantarctic fur seals, vagrant to a particular area, need not come from the nearest or the same rookery. The largest population of Subantarctic fur seals, at Gough Island, contributes some 55% to global pup production of this species (Bester 1987; Bester *et al.* 2006). While this location lies some 7000 km distant and is on the other side of the African continent, it is also a possible source of vagrants to the western Indian Ocean. Although prevailing currents are a third

factor of possible importance in determining the source of vagrants, the long distance these vagrant seals would have travelled in tropical or subtropical waters, should they have followed the prevailing currents of the southern Indian Ocean Gyre, mitigates against this. Furthermore, Subantarctic fur seals of known origin have been recorded at sites which they most likely reached by swimming across currents (Bester 1989; Ferreira *et al.* 2008).

The length of the animal recorded at Unguja Island indicates that it was immature. A comparison to mass:length data presented in Bester & Van Jaarsveld (1994) indicates that it was underweight for its length and therefore possibly starving. This is confirmed by an examination of the photographs (Fig. 2). This is unsurprising considering the distance it was found from the normal latitudinal range of this species.

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