

THE SYSTEMATICS AND TAXONOMY OF ROCKHOPPER PENGUINS, *EUDYPTES CHRYSOCOME*

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The taxonomy of rockhopper penguins, *Eudyptes chrysocome*, is contentious. Some authorities recognise three subspecies based on morphological differences and the geographical separation of breeding populations while others suggest that morphological differences support classifying rockhopper penguins as two distinct species. The taxonomy of rockhopper penguins is not just of academic interest. Breeding colonies worldwide have declined markedly in size since the 1930s. We sequenced three mitochondrial gene regions from the three putative rockhopper species. We then compared the genetic distances between the three rockhopper penguin subspecies to the distances between various penguin sister species to clarify the taxonomy and systematics of rockhopper penguins and thus their conservation status. Genetic distances, relative to other closely related penguin species, support reclassifying the three rockhopper penguin subspecies as full species. Reclassification of rockhopper penguins would result in their conservation status being upgraded from Vulnerable to Endangered.