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Bulwer's Petrel. © Jack Crowe

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**Aims and Activities:**

The Society was formed in 1946 to provide a forum for the exchange of information on seabirds, and land birds at sea, by members for whom birdwatching is a spare time recreation and hobby. It also aims to coordinate the efforts of individual members using standardised recording methods so that observations can be of value to the professional ornithologist. In addition to the promotion of observations afloat, the RNBWS organises fieldwork and expeditions, often in cooperation with the Army and RAF Ornithological Societies, and supports conservation initiatives in the field. The Royal Naval Birdwatching Society was the first organisation in the world to collect, collate and publish global data on seabirds and landbirds at sea.

Membership is open to all those, regardless of nationality, who share a common interest in birds at sea. Instructions for joining can be had on application to the Secretary.

**Subscription Rates:** Members living in the UK £15; £20 for those living elsewhere. Subscriptions are due on 1 January and may be Gift Aided. Library rates: £15 plus postage (UK); £20 plus postage (outside UK).

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**Material for publication** in *Sea Swallow* should be sent to the editor. Ideally submissions should be in MS Word but other formats are acceptable. Graphics should be jpeg or tiff. Accompanying photographs should always be the original camera files, and not cropped in any way. Contributions are welcome at any time, but if for inclusion in the next edition should reach the editor by 30 July.

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**Plate 1.** HMS *Protector*, Antarctica.  
© Phil Boak

# Chairman's foreword

by Lt Cdr Philip Boak, RN

I am absolutely delighted to be able to write this Chairman's Foreword, having taken over the role from Martin Alabaster on 1 January 2024. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Martin, both personally and on behalf of the Society, for his excellent leadership and governance of the RNBWS.

Martin has of course moved on to the role of Editor of the RNBWS Journal *Sea Swallow*, having taken over from David Dobson, who did an outstanding job as editor over the last twelve years. The 2024 edition of *Sea Swallow* continues David's fine legacy, with the usual array of stunning photographs and in-depth articles. Of particular interest in this edition is the account by Jack Crowe of an incredibly successful trip to Madeira which saw a 'record breaking' number of Zino's Petrels netted and ringed. There is also a striking update from Shetland by Keith Cowieson, and an interesting account of visiting New Zealand's Sub-Antarctic islands by Nigel Hacking.

To report more generally about the Society, I am pleased to say that we remain in good shape, and are currently enjoying an upwards trajectory in terms of membership, engagement and outreach. Over the last year several new members have joined, including serving personnel of the Royal Navy of all ranks and rates. We have also been joined by veterans, scientists and those who share the same interests as us; wildlife and conservation. My thanks go to our Treasurer Tony Tindale for much of the behind-the-scenes work with respect to managing our membership base. It has also been particularly pleasing to establish or reinvigorate links with organisations including the British Antarctic Survey, Scott Polar Research Institute and the United Kingdom Overseas Territories Conservation Forum.

Over the last year the Society enjoyed its biannual fieldtrip to Portland, UK. A particular thanks go to Mark Cutts for organising these trips, with the Spring Fieldtrip attracting the largest number of members we have ever had at such a gathering. Please do get involved in the Society, and it would be great to continue to see new and existing members at these events.

At a recent Executive Committee meeting at HMS *Collingwood* much was discussed, including reinvigorating the grant scheme. This makes small sums of money available to persons or groups carrying out conservation or research projects which broadly align with the Society's aims and objectives. We were very pleased to recently give a grant in support of the South Georgia Pipit Project, and look forward to hearing about the progress of the project in next year's *Sea Swallow*. If you have a project that may benefit from such a grant, please get in touch with the Secretary.

Lastly from me, I would like to thank all members, and anyone who is reading this journal or who has engaged with the Society. The strength of the RNBWS lies in its people, and I have been absolutely privileged to work with and hear from so many passionate, helpful and knowledgeable individuals.

**Lt Cdr Philip Boak, RN**  
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Plate 2. Mist nets on Pico do Areeiro.

# The RNBWS summer expedition to Madeira 2024 assisting the Freira Conservation Project to monitor europe's rarest seabird, Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira*, an update July 2024

by Lt Jack Crowe, RN & Lt Megan Hanson, RN

(All plates by the authors)

The history of how breeding Zino's Petrels, *Pterodroma madeira*, were rediscovered on Madeira and the subsequent efforts to ensure that the rarest of European Sea Birds continued to exist for the generations to come is inspiring and brilliantly summarised by Frank Zino and Manuel Biscoito in *Sea Swallow* 69. As new members to the RNBWS, we were quickly acquainted with the tireless work of the Zino Family and their colleagues in protecting the Zino's Petrel and swiftly resolved to visit the islands ourselves to gain a better understanding of the environment in which conservation efforts take place and to help promote the vital work of the Freira Conservation Project (FCP) in their continued efforts to protect *P. madeira*.

This year's RNBWS summer expedition to Madeira is the latest in a long line of collaborations between RNBWS members and those looking to protect the seabirds of Macaronesia, be that Royal Naval support for expeditions to Bugio to study *P. deserta* in the 1980s or more recent assistance with efforts to monitor and ring birds on the high peaks of Madeira. This year's expedition, supported by a grant from the Society, aimed to continue to assist with monitoring efforts around Pico do Areeiro, while the RNBWS Chairman Phil Boak continued his work to document the birds (principally at night using infrared video but also at sea during the day) following his excellent record of the bird's spring courtship displays last year via thermal imaging. Here we will concentrate on the work of the FCP.

The target colony, for netting, resides in the slopes of Pico do Cidrão, a subsidiary peak of the central massif and is accessible from Pico do Areeiro, the second highest peak on the island of Madeira. Rising from sea level to 1,818m in 9km, the peaks are hit by strong, cold mid-Atlantic winds, and heavy rain with thick cloud is common. It is fair to say the conditions experienced at this altitude are challenging year-round, especially at night when temperatures can fall below 0°C even in summer. This contrasts sharply with conditions at the coast where sea water temperature rarely falls below 18°C. The mountains themselves are formed of igneous rock covered in volcanic gravel, which makes leaving the maintained paths extremely hazardous and can cause serious damage to the slopes where the birds breed. In summary, a difficult place to monitor wildlife.

On the evening of our first day, we found ourselves driving through the Natural Park of Madeira (PNM) on roads with inclines exceeding, at times, 20%. The severity of the environment was already clear, having passed through a dense cloud layer and seeing the vertical cliff faces of the mountains looming over us. RNBWS members who had previously visited the mountains had informed us that successful netting at Pico do Cidrão requires three things: the birds to be present in mountains (breeding season: Mar–Oct), a windless night to allow safe erection and operation of the equipment, and the darkness afforded by a new moon, so that the birds cannot detect the presence of the net. Despite the mountains reputation for poor environmental conditions, to our delight and good fortune conditions appeared perfect for ringing; we were nervously optimistic. These certainly contrasted to conditions three days later when we returned to the peaks with very strong winds curtailing netting efforts before we even left the car park.

Our first impressions of Pico do Areeiro were that the peak seemed an unusual spot for observing one of Europe's rarest seabirds. The path used to access Pico do Cidrão is part of a longer route heading for Pico Ruivo (Madeira's highest peak) and it thronged with sightseers enjoying the sunset. As the tourists started to leave, we heard the unmistakable sound of a Land Rover coming up the mountain and knew that shortly we would be making the brief but strenuous trek along the mountain paths to the ringing site, located close to the nesting ledges.

Frank and Buffy Zino emerged from the front of the vehicle and introductions were made. While Frank Zino, honorary RNBWS member, is well known to the society; equally important to project success is his wife Buffy. Frank takes measurements and rings the birds while Buffy records the details of each individual. They are both assisted by Martin Melim, a young Madeiran biologist who works for another well-known RNBWS contributor (and newest honorary member) Manuel Biscoito, at the Marine Biology Station of Funchal. Under Buffy's direction equipment was shared out amongst our party while we awaited our final members, several representatives from Portuguese conservationist groups.

On their arrival, we set off in the failing light on the marked trail to the ringing site. Although in mostly good repair the path is broken in places with care needed especially in the dark. The ringing site itself sits between two peaks atop a steep arête with a shear drop to either side. This location, just above the breeding ledges on Pico do Cidrão, is ideal for netting as the birds are concentrated between the peaks as they transit between either side of the ridge.



Plate 3. Netting on Pico do Areeiro.

At ridge crest, Frank and Martin swiftly set up the net and designated an area for taking measurements. Within minutes Martin called from the darkness, our first catch. Excitement quickly became concern as a Madeiran Pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus maderensis*, was discovered. Both Frank and Martin quickly set about untangling the bat's delicate membranes from the net all while deftly avoiding its constant biting attempts. After a few tense moments the individual was released unharmed, if a little annoyed, and the net was raised once again.

The characteristic 'cries of lost shepherds' echoing around the hills were our first indication of the night that Zino's Petrel were on the wing. Soon after that we had our first bird in hand. The ringing process involved Martin extracting the bird from the net and placing it in a soft cotton bag, which would then be tied to a railing until Frank was ready to process it, while allowing time for the bird to settle down. The bird's dimensions and weight are recorded, and a ring is attached, before each bird is inspected for parasites and a blood sample for DNA analysis taken. Finally, the individual is photographed before being walked down the path and placed on a quiet ledge from which it can take wing back into the night.



Plate 4. An occupied holding bag.



Plate 5. Ringing a Zino's Petrel.





Plate 6. Megan with a Zino's Petrel.



Plate 7. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 8. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 9. Examining a nettee.



Following our first catch, a second, third and fourth shortly followed with little cotton bags hanging from the railing in a line like patients at a doctor's surgery. We continued to net petrels at a rate of approximately one every 20 minutes for the next two and a half hours. Catching eight birds in total, two had been previously ringed as juveniles. Having the birds in hand while they were being processed offered the opportunity to observe each bird closely. Their long slender wings, glossy black eyes, and tube nose were particularly fascinating. We even got to experience first-hand the sharp hooked tip of the petrel's bill as bird five latched onto Jack's index finger while Frank was attaching the ring to its long delicate leg. Each bird had a large, webbed foot with three sharp claws and in all the individuals we encountered the claws were long and undamaged; they had not yet dug burrows and Frank confirmed that most birds caught are in this condition. Two of these birds did have parasitic mites which were expertly removed for further investigation.



Plate 10. Jack with a Zino's Petrel.

Eight birds ringed on one night is near the record of ten and with three managing to escape the net before anyone reached them it was a quite remarkable evening. Only 25 birds were netted in the 6 years to 2023 so this was a bumper session. These numbers are clearly small, which makes each bird caught incredibly valuable. With the total population of Zino's Petrel still very low and the bird still classified as endangered by the IUCN, there is a balance to be struck between the collection of data for ensuring their survival and avoiding unnecessary disruption of the bird's natural behaviour. Netting by highly qualified and experienced persons such as Frank is undoubtedly the best way to achieve both aims.

At present, the population continues to be monitored from ringing on the nest (both juveniles and adults) as well as through netting on the peaks. Both are important, giving an insight into different aspects of the population's health. Recapture of a ringed bird in the net allows an observer to assess ages of return and when they start to breed. This understanding is vital in assessing the health of the population and we look forward to reading more on this in future published works of the FCP.



Plate 11. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 12. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 13. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 14. Zino's Petrel.

Our duty of care to the birds didn't end with placing them on the ledge for release. Each individual is designated a human chaperone to watch them until they safely returned to the sky. Most birds left within minutes of being placed on the ground, however some took more than an hour before departing. The birds themselves seem entirely unaware of the danger posed to them by remaining on the release ledges where they may be predated by cats or stumbled upon by late night walkers. The latter of these we experienced personally on both night time trips to the mountain, with groups observed on the trail throughout the night, blaring loud music and shining powerful torches. These have the potential to blind the birds and cause fatality through collision with the surrounding cliffs and offer cover for any more illicit activity to the crags at night (egg collectors). It is vital for this reason that park regulations are respected, and the paths are used only during daylight. More efforts may be required to keep the public informed of when they are permitted access the ridges.

Night time visits are not the only tourism related concern. Visitor numbers to Pico do Areeiro is relentlessly rising every year with numbers now in excess of 5,000 per day. This not only risks damaging the ledges through enthusiastic sightseers trying to reach the best views for photos but also brings with it huge volumes of litter. Litter is a huge risk to the continued success of Zino's Petrel conservation because it attracts rats, which are the number one risk to nesting birds and their young. Rat eradication and cat control continues to be the most important conservation work for the survival of this species and is undertaken by the Institute for Forests and Nature Conservation (IFCN) who also have responsibility for monitoring of the path at night. As we write, wildfires once again rage in Madeira's mountains, with this year's broods in enormous peril. A devastating consequence of Madeira's changing climate and environment. Madeiran Broom, *Genista maderensis*, is increasingly spreading throughout the high mountainous areas and this provides a dangerous vehicle for fast spreading fires, which can do so much damage to the birds (described in Frank's article in *Sea Swallow* 62). Finally, we



Plate 15. Zino's Petrel.



Plate 16. Zino's Petrel.

must never take our eye off the threat posed by egg collectors, who now, due to the accessibility of the ledges are better placed than ever to achieve their nefarious aims.

Clearly the conservation of Zino's Petrel remains complex with many factors impacting the species chances of long-term survival and recovery. Rat and cat eradication efforts continue to control the risk posed by predation but if those efforts are not sustained the population will quickly reduce once again to critical levels. New risks from excessive tourism and wildfire present new challenges to overcome. With breeding numbers increased significantly since the 1960s and reports of more birds than ever observed flying in Madeira's high peaks, those involved in the FCP have a lot to be proud of. It is vital, however, that this work is not considered complete while the risks still exist, and breeding numbers remain low.

It was with some satisfaction that we departed the mountain under the glow of a rising moon, warmed by the knowledge that we had contributed in our own small way to the continued success of the project. We cannot recommend a visit to see this vital work in person highly enough and would like to draw attention to the availability of RNBWS funding to support members to travel to Madeira to visit the FCP. Please contact the secretary for further information.

Our grateful thanks are extended to Manuel Biscoito, Director of the Marine Biology Station of Funchal for provision of accommodation throughout our stay and to Frank and Buffy Zino for their guidance, time and hospitality.

*Lt Jack Crowe, RN & Lt Megan Hanson, RN*  
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# Expedition SIMMER DIM 23 - Royal Air Force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) expedition to north mainland Shetland, June 2023

by Gp Capt Keith Cowieson, RAF, RAFOS Field Activities Liaison Officer  
(All plates by the author unless otherwise stated)

Following the devastating outbreaks of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in the 2021–22 breeding seasons, understanding how seabird populations were affected was deemed essential. Accordingly, a one-off coordinated programme of targeted seabird counts across the UK was planned by an *ad-hoc* Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP) HPAI Task and Finish Group, to help understand how HPAI was affecting the numbers of birds returning to breed in 2023. This would also supplement the routine counts normally undertaken as part of the SMP. The targeted re-surveys were directed towards key species and sites most affected by high mortality in 2022, but also included some coverage of those less affected for comparison. RAFOS had previously mounted expeditions in support of the 4th SMP Periodic Census, ‘Seabirds Count’ (SC), on the north-western and western peninsulas of Mainland Shetland (2019 & 21). The Society was thus suitably qualified and uniquely experienced to carry out targeted re-surveys of some of those Grid Squares visited in 2019 & 21.

Expedition SIMMER DIM (SD) 2023 took place in northern Mainland Shetland with re-surveying taking place from 13–23 Jun and comprised personnel from RAFOS, RNBWS and the Army Ornithological Society (AOS). The mission was to re-survey all breeding seabirds - with particular emphasis on skua and gull species - in targeted grid squares surveyed during the 2019 & 2021 expeditions - insofar as timing and resources permitted.

The re-survey’s aim was to collect full colony counts, conducted at the appropriate time periods and using appropriate methods for the target skua and gull species. Dr Connie Tremlett, the overall Emergency HPAI SMP coordinator, identified potential sites and species deemed as the highest priority, and RAFOS coordinated with her and other surveyors to minimise the chances of double-counting. Additionally, given the emerging and alarming news of HPAI outbreaks amongst tern colonies on the UK mainland east coast<sup>1</sup>, the team decided to re-survey as many of the local tern colonies as possible.

This year we deployed an 8-strong team, arriving in Lerwick from Aberdeen in mid-June. All the members were already familiar with survey methodology, predominant topography and habitat from 2019 & 21, so we were able to hit the ground running and conduct any necessary refresher training/mentoring, on-the-job, whilst remaining mindful of the precautions required to ensure compliance with prevailing national HPAI guidance.

<sup>1</sup> <https://isleofmaynnr.wordpress.com/2023/05/31/a-tern-for-the-worse/>





Plate 17. Bonxie<sup>2</sup> on territory.

### Emergency HPAI SMP priorities

The priority for our re-survey work on north Mainland Shetland remained focussed on skua and inland gull colonies, as not only are some of these species giving rise to great conservation concern, but also in the case of the Great Skua, one of species worst hit by HPAI during the 2021 & 22 breeding seasons, and whose Scottish population was previously estimated to represent ~60% of the global total (Burnell *et al.* 2023). We approached our task with mixed feelings, keen yet worried to discover the impact wrought by HPAI.

### Observations

So, what did we discover during our survey and what Lessons were we able to identify for future breeding seabird surveyors? The task was simple, re-survey a targeted selection of grid squares containing both denser concentrations of breeding Great Skua and those with more widely spaced individual pairs typically found on the drier, higher ridges between voes<sup>3</sup>, through a snap-shot, single visit. Our aggregated 2019 & 21 SC observations are tabulated below, alongside the re-survey results:

<sup>2</sup> The local Northern Isles' name for Great Skua.

<sup>3</sup> Health warning - 2023 figures not yet checked by SMP coordinator.

**Table 1.** Changes in breeding seabird populations on north Mainland Shetland (from 131 targeted Grid Squares re-surveyed), 2019 & 2021 v 2023<sup>4</sup>.

Species	Seabirds Count (2019 & 2021)	Emergency HPAI SMP (2023)	% Change
Arctic Skua	15 AOT	25 AOT	+67
Great Skua	132 AOT	60 AOT	-55
Great Black-backed Gull	17 AOT	32 AON/AOT	+88
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	3 AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	1 AOT	4 AOT	N/A
Common Gull	58 AOT	69 AON/AOT	+17
Black-headed Gull	16 AOT	22 AON/AOT	+38
Arctic Tern	28	220 AON/AOT	+686 <sup>5</sup>

Source: Seabird Monitoring Programme On-line Database <https://app.bto.org/seabirds/public/index.jsp>

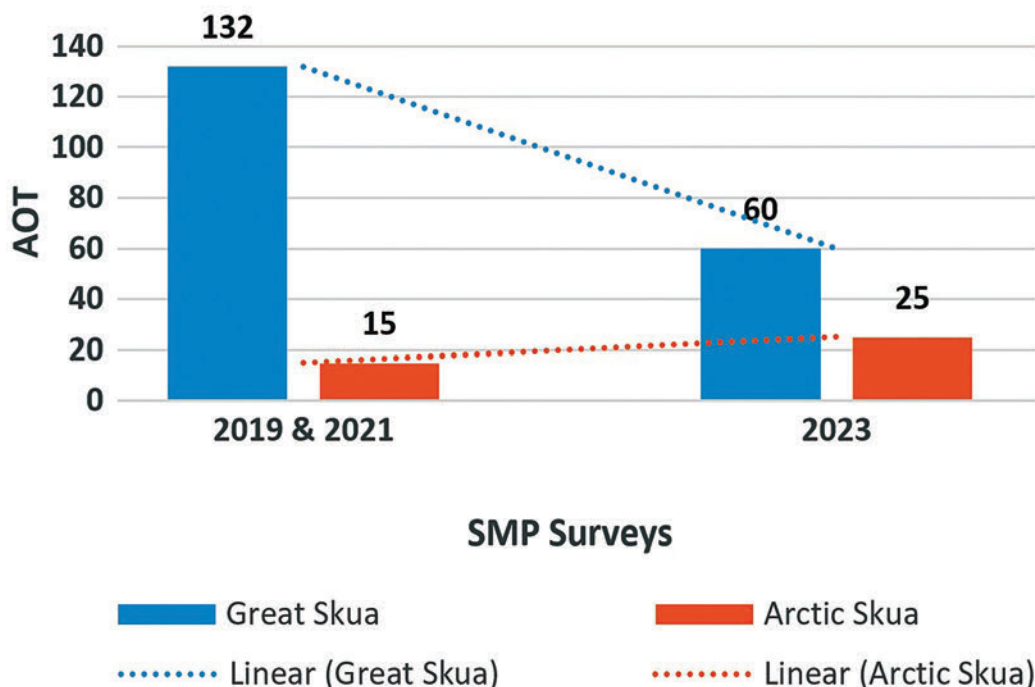
Note: AOT = Apparently occupied Territory, AON = Apparently occupied nest

<sup>4</sup> Health warning - 2023 figures not yet checked by SMP coordinator.

<sup>5</sup> Monitoring of Arctic tern colonies during SC was mainly by local teams, not RAFOS.

### Skua colony observations

Our skua observations from the 131 targeted grid squares re-surveyed revealed what all informed commentators and observers had predicted, that Great Skua numbers would suffer a significant decline following the scourge of HPAI in the 2021 & 22 breeding seasons - in our case by -55% from 132 to 60 AOT. This was the lowest of, but in keeping with, declines recorded during other Emergency HPAI targeted re-surveys elsewhere, e.g. of -60% at Canna; -69% at the Shiant Isles; -71% at Fair Isle; -



**Figure 1.** Changes in skua populations on north Mainland Shetland, 2019 & 21 v 2023



78% at Hermaness and -85% at Noss (Seabird Group, 2023). Interestingly, the overall bonxie decline in 2023 (from an estimated 81% of the total UK breeding population that was covered by both business-as-usual monitoring and additional Emergency HPAI resurveys) was estimated at -75% (Tremlett *et al.* 2024).

Encouragingly, although there were several indications of the previous seasons' high mortality among Bonxie populations - skeletal remains and unoccupied territorial 'look-out mounds' with associated old nest cups in territories that were occupied in the 2019 & 21 seasons - we encountered no indications of HPAI infection among the remnant Great Skua population.



**Plate 18.** Bonxie skeletal remains.



**Plate 19.** Surveyor on unoccupied Bonxie 'look-out' mound/territory.

On Great Skuas, the Chair of the Seabird Group had requested that we re-survey samples of both the larger denser colonies and smaller groupings where breeding territories were more widely spaced, on isolated and narrow peatland ridges. As expected, the denser the colony previously, the greater the apparent mortality, in the worst case an 81% decline was recorded. By contrast, on a less densely populated peatland site, the decline was 13%. Meanwhile on one particularly narrow ridge, where 8 pairs of Great Skua had been spaced every 500–900m, only 3 of the original 8 pairs were missing and on another particular western morainic flat in more glaciated terrain, the small colony of 5 pairs of bonxies found within a 300m<sup>2</sup> area in 2021 had declined by only 1 pair.

**Table 2.** Change in Great Skua populations 2019–2023.

Great Skua colonies	Seabirds Count (2019 & 21)	Emergency HPAI SMP	% Change	Remarks
Colony A	67 AOT	13 AOT	- 81	Dense peatland colony
Colony B	30	26	-13	Less dense peatland colony
Colony C	10	8	-25	Isolated peat ridge
Colony D	7	2	-71	Isolated peat headland
Colony E	8	5	-38	Isolated peat ridge
Colony F	8	5	-38	Narrow peat ridge above voe

Meanwhile, our sample of Arctic Skua numbers had increased by a surprising 67%, from 15 to 25 AOT, albeit in our admittedly small sample of 131 targeted grid squares re-surveyed. This increase perhaps reflecting an element of release from the ‘top down’ pressure of the burgeoning, pre-HPAI population of competing/predatory Great Skua, postulated to have helped contribute to the catastrophic historical Arctic Skua decline in Scotland (Perkins *et al.* 2018).



**Plate 20.** Pale morph Sooty Allan<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The local Northern Isles’ names for the Arctic skua.



## Inland gull observations

Inland breeding gulls on the targeted grid squares of north Mainland Shetland were still doing well, numbers seemingly unaffected by HPAI. Notwithstanding their previous relative paucity on the peatlands, on the higher, drier ridges between, Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) numbers had increased by 88%, albeit from a low base, perhaps through release from Bonxie competition and predation on shared habitat? Similarly, Common Gull (*Larus canus*) numbers had also increased, bolstering, further the local increase we had recorded since *Seabird 2000* (Cowieson, 2021). Finally, it was gratifying to note that the isolated small Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) colony in our survey area had escaped the HPAI ravages suffered by many colonies further south.



Plate 21. Great Black-backed Gull nest, egg & chicks.

## Lessons identified & top tips for surveyors

### Planning

During survey planning, it is useful to scrutinise the grid squares to be surveyed using Google Maps' satellite picture or similar, to see if they appear to have been improved by Crofters (into grassland) for stock grazing or remain unimproved moor or peatland. We found no nesting Great Skuas on improved grassland, but surveyed it nonetheless for other species / Seabirds Count purposes. The attached 'what3words' imagery of the Ronas Hill approach road shows clearly the green 'improved' areas of grassland to the east (right of the satellite picture) and unimproved (brownish) moor or peatland to the west, left, with the straight dividing lines between both representing stock fences or drystone-type dykes/ditches etc.

### Skua surveying techniques

Four years of breeding seabird surveying, concentrating on priority breeding skuas, inland nesting gulls and terns, have reinforced lessons identified in previous years, namely that in order to most comprehensively and best survey such species, transect walking and flush counting, respectively, are the two most accurate and effective methods - as set out in the 'Seabird monitoring handbook for Britain and Ireland' (Walsh *et al.* 1995) and 'Bird Census Techniques, 2nd Edition' (Bibby *et al.* 1992).



**Figure 2.** Satellite imagery with clearly green improved grassland to right of centre and brown unimproved peatland to left. © 'what3words'

In our survey area, Arctic Skua territories were sparse and, as witnessed in 2019 & 21, often easily overlooked, as the birds were relatively undemonstrative, unless surveyors were heading directly towards nest, eggs or chicks. This reinforces our impression that Arctic Skua numbers in such habitat are likely to be under-recorded. Breeding Arctic Skua pairs often only became obvious when surveyors were bearing down on them within 30 metres or so, despite having scoped or glassed the area at regular intervals on the approach.

In stark contrast, the behaviour of their larger Great Skua cousins was much more obvious with off-the-nest birds flying out to inspect approaching surveyors at ranges of 200–300 metres, often revealing previously unnoticed birds and territories. In this respect our findings mirror those of previous years - transect walking is the only sure way of surveying the bulk of breeding skua territories in rolling peatland landscapes, and even then a proportion of Arctic Skua pairs will likely be overlooked. In north Mainland Shetland, the peat hag-dominated landscape essentially rendered most attempts at surveying skuas, accurately, from vantage points redundant, due to the significant areas of 'dead ground'<sup>7</sup> hidden by folds and dips in the undulating landscape.



**Plate 22.** Typical north Mainland Shetland peatland habitat.

<sup>7</sup> An area of ground hidden from an observer due to undulations in the land.



### Skua breeding site fidelity

Another previous skua observation that was reinforced during the expedition was that of skua site fidelity and thus probable breeding-site philopatry<sup>8</sup>, exhibited by both Great & Arctic Skua. This was touched upon in previous SD Grant reports where it was noted that active Bonxie nests were often side-by-side with previous seasons' nest cups. What really highlighted skua site fidelity this year was that on revisiting previous, isolated, Arctic Skua breeding sites from the 2019 & 21 SC surveys, all bar one was occupied, with nests and young being discovered in virtually the same spots as before. Both species therefore display very strong site fidelity. Using historical GPS-derived coordinates, future surveyors should be able to proceed directly to previous territories and nest sites and quickly establish whether or not the traditional territory is occupied, without having to undertake the time-consuming searches of past years.



**Plate 23.** Bonxie nest-site fidelity - current nest back right with egg & old nest cup in front.



**Plate 24 & 25.** Scooty Allan site fidelity - 2023 top with 2019 within 3 metres.

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philopatry#Breeding-site\\_philopatry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philopatry#Breeding-site_philopatry). The tendency of an animal to remain in or return to the area of its birth e.g. more than 99% of Laysan albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) in a study returned to exactly the same nest in consecutive years.



**Plate 26.** Looking a Bonxie in the eye.

### Seabird mobbing

Aggressive nest defence by mobbing skuas, gulls and terns is intimidating for experienced and novice breeding seabird surveyors alike. Although unusual to be physically struck, it is nevertheless an unnerving experience for many, and some recommend not only wearing stout headgear but also holding a walking pole or suchlike above head-height, as birds invariably attack the highest point of the intruder. Over the years I have found that facing attacking birds, and looking them directly in the eye will invariably cause them to veer away or pull up short of the observer. Conversely, turning one's back on the birds can lead to being hit, occasionally - and I have had the odd 'bump' to prove it.



**Plate 27.** Dark morph Arctic skua distraction display, indicative of nearby nest, eggs or young.

Another observation is that the ferocity of the mobbing attack, and the closeness of the pass, is often another cue to proximity of nest or chicks. The closer and more frequent the attacks from Bonxie, the 'hotter' the surveyor is. With Arctic Skua, the risk of being hit is less, but a good giveaway to proximity to nest or chicks is the extent to which the 'Skooty Allan' flutter closer and closer around one's head, or perform a 'dying duck' distraction display around one's feet. Again, the closer and more frequent, the 'hotter' the surveyor is. My recommendations to fellow breeding seabird surveyors then is to face attacking seabirds directly, if possible, and look them straight in the eye as you make your way gingerly through tern, gull and skua colonies. The more demonstrative they become, the closer to nest and/or chicks you are. That said, clearly one should not linger in the vicinity when the birds are agitated, only remaining long enough to record the nest or ring the young, particularly if the weather is cold, windy or wet.



Finally, vivid patches of well-manured, green plots in otherwise uniform brown peat and heathland-dominated landscapes are another good giveaway for locating Great Skua (and Great Black-backed Gull) territories and nest sites. These invariably indicate historical breeding sites and lookout posts, well-fertilised by guano and the decomposing corpses of prey over the years.

### Seabird nest incorporation of debris

Dr Nina O’Hanlon’s fine initiative in requesting surveyors to note any seabird nest incorporation of plastic and/or other debris during their work, in order that the proportion of nests affected could be ascertained, is now a very successful and well established procedure. The resultant Birds and Debris website catalogues the incorporation of plastic and other debris in all bird species’ nests, worldwide (Birds & Debris, 2023). On Mainland Shetland, we found that many shorelines contained varying amounts of plastic and other litter - noticeably worse by fish & shellfish farms - and several Arctic tern nests were again discovered this year in wrack & flotsam-littered shingle beaches, containing thread-like plastic, plastic rope, metal wire and other debris. The terns’ nests were part of a small colony of 18 pairs, sadly surrounded by, and interspersed with, the detritus of fish farm and other activity.



Plate 28 & 29. Arctic Tern nests containing and amidst plastic debris.

### Non-target bird species and other wildlife

Shetland’s appeal is not limited to seabirds either, there were good numbers of breeding wetland birds and waterfowl in the survey area, such as Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Tufted Duck, Teal, wild Greylag Goose, Wigeon, locally common Red-throated Diver and 2 pairs of Whooper Swan.

Breeding waders abound, including Curlew, Dunlin, Golden Plover, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Ringed Plover, Snipe, and numerous Whimbrel. We were also fortunate enough to come across territorial Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, and breeding Greenshank too.

Passerines and doves included Blackbird, Collared Dove, Dunnock, Hooded Crow, House Sparrow, Skylark, Meadow & Rock Pipit, Raven, Rock Dove, Skylark, Starling, Swallow, Twite, Woodpigeon, and Shetland Wren, as well as several pairs of Red Grouse. Notwithstanding recent reported declines in some populations of breeding birds in Shetland (Hughes *et al.* 2021), for those accustomed to depauperate



**Plate 30.** Newly-hatched Greylag goslings.



**Plate 31.** Black-tailed Godwit on territory. © Brian Lyon

mainland UK populations, Shetland offers an impressive and diverse assemblage of birds with numbers of waders being especially abundant, perhaps reflecting the reduced suite of native mammalian predators on the islands. Added wildlife bonuses include seals, otter and good numbers of mountain hare.

## Conclusion

In sum, 131 previously-surveyed SC grid square and other sites were re-surveyed in the parishes of Delting, Lunnasting, Nesting, & Northmavine of Mainland Shetland by RAFOS, RNBWS & AOS personnel in 2023. The sites ranged in character from Arctic-alpine fjell-field, tundra-like heather moorland and peat hags & bog, to stretches of sandy and shingle beaches. Personnel covered many miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 47 x BTO BirdTrack species lists from 12 separate 10 km squares with a total of 664 BirdTrack entries from 67 species recorded in the survey area. Additionally, several nest record cards covering a variety of species were also generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme; 2 x Nest Incorporation of Debris records were posted on the Birds & Debris website (both Arctic tern); 9 x Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database, and 34 moth species records forwarded to the Shetland Moth Recorder.

Finally, the RAFOS Chairman and Committee would like to express their sincere gratitude to both The Seabird Group and NorthLink Ferries for their generous grant and sponsorships towards the costs of our 2023 and previous expeditions. All participants have found the experience of tremendous value and benefit, learnt significant new skills in the process and are grateful for being given the opportunity to assist in this vital strand of work. We all now look forward, rather wistfully and longingly, to the 5th National Periodic Census of Breeding Seabirds in the UK and Ireland - in 2030 or so? - and to digesting the results of Seabirds Count findings in the recently published, magisterial, eponymous tome (Burnell *et al.* 2023).

**Gp Capt Keith Cowieson, RAFOS**

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## Appendix 1.

### List of species mentioned in the text

Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Red-breasted Merganser <i>Mergus serrator</i>	Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	Ruff <i>Calidris pugnax</i>
Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>	Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>
Wigeon <i>Mareca penelope</i>	Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Red-throated Diver <i>Gavia stellata</i>	Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>
Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Great Skua (Bonxie) <i>Stercorarius skua</i>	Duncock <i>Prunella modularis</i>
Arctic Skua (Sooty Allan) <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix</i>
Great Black-backed Gull <i>Larus marinus</i>	House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull <i>Larus fuscus</i>	Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Herring Gull <i>Larus argentatus</i>	Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Common Gull <i>Larus canus</i>	Rock Pipit <i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Black-headed Gull <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Raven <i>Corvus corax</i>
Arctic Tern <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Rock Dove <i>Columba livia</i>
Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>	Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>	Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	Twite <i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
Lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>
Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Shetland Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes zetlandicus</i>
Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>	Red Grouse <i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i>



# The Falkland Islands - a second year

by Cdr Chris Moorey, RN

In this second article for *Sea Swallow* since returning to the Falkland Islands in 2022, I thought it worth focussing on the impact of the H5N1 strain of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (henceforth referred to as 'Bird Flu') on local bird populations and how the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) has managed the outbreak. I will also take a look at the birds of Sealion Island, which lies about 10 miles off the southern coast of East Falkland and is also the site of the memorial to those who lost their lives when HMS *Sheffield* was struck by an Exocet missile in May 1982.

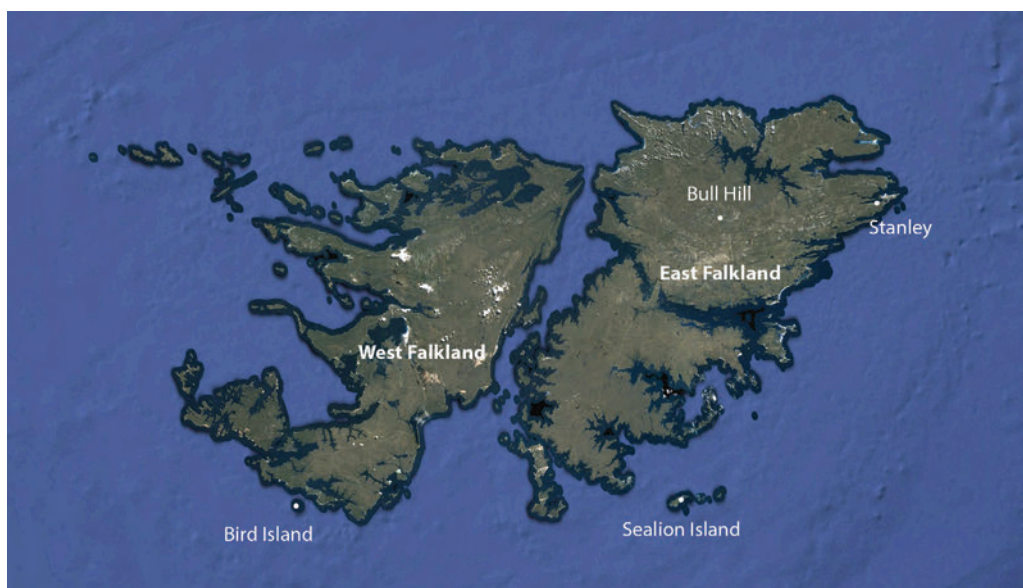


Figure 1. The Falkland Islands. © Google Earth

Returning to Bird Flu, the people of the Falkland Islands are immensely proud of their diverse and abundant wildlife. In addition to the emotional attachment, birdlife is a central component of the tourism industry and the outer settlements and islands are particularly dependent on their penguin, albatross, shearwater and cormorant colonies. It is therefore unsurprising that very early on in the H5N1 outbreak, the FIG, in concert with 'Falklands Conservation' (see last year's article for more information) and other stakeholders produced a comprehensive guidance document for local organizations, residents and visitors. It included a range of information on Bird Flu including typical symptoms seen in birds, seals and dolphins; how to report sick or dead birds and animals; details of the FIG response in the event of suspected and confirmed cases; underpinning legislation; biosecurity guidelines; general guidance to both residents and visitors, along with more bespoke guidance to cruise ships, airstrip operators, tour operators, hotel operators, landowners, poultry owners and merchant vessel crews.

In planning for the arrival in the islands of Bird Flu, it was decided that internal FIG reporting between leadership elements of various government departments would employ the 'IIMARCH Report' format: Information, Intent, Method, Administration, Risk assessment, Communication and Humanitarian Issues. These reports, issued weekly by the Senior Veterinary Officer and her team, would keep all elements of government abreast of latest developments and intentions in the effort to contain the virus.

In terms of communicating with society more generally, as the virus spread globally - and following its inevitable arrival in the islands in late 2023 - the public have been kept informed and updated via radio, television, social media and press releases when suspect or confirmed cases have occurred. Depending on the circumstances and numbers of birds involved, in the event of reports of dead birds - or birds with symptoms - the Veterinary Service may declare a suspect case, premises or place and the Director of Natural Resources will act on that by declaring a Temporary Control Zone around the suspect place (typically 1–3 km radius). That area is then subject to a range of restrictions such as reduced and recorded movement of people, mandatory biosecurity requirements, poultry restrictions and the suspension of air and ferry services. These restrictions remain in place while swabs are taken from dead birds or animals. If the swabs return negative results, then restrictions are raised as soon as possible.

In the event that Bird Flu is confirmed by testing, the colony, farm or area is declared an infected place and a protection zone is established - typically an area of 3–5km radius. Within the protection zone unauthorized access to and from the site is prohibited - a measure that clearly has a significant impact on the local tourism industry. Once the decision has been made to declare on infected place, a 'Notice of Declaration of Infected Place' is published under the Animal Health (Emergency Measures for Outbreaks of Infectious Diseases) Order 2022 and signed-off by the Director of Natural Resources. The notice, delivered to the occupier of the site concerned includes details of restrictions and requirements. Once the notice has been issued, a 'Public Service Announcement' is also issued and distributed to the general public and all stakeholders via e-mail, radio and TV. Care is taken to ensure that landowners and occupiers are fully briefed before public announcements are made. Those announcements are comprehensive and, apart from details of the protection zone (including maps), also include information on the background of the local outbreak in terms of which species have been found to be infected and in what numbers; when the notice will be reviewed; references to FIG guidance and public health warnings and they also repeat contact numbers for reporting dead or sick animals and/or birds.

This has been a challenging time for the Falkland Islands and elements of its avifauna - particularly for those sites and islands severely impacted, with some populations of Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* (Steeple Jason Island) and Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua* (Sealion Island) suffering significant mortality. However, with the breeding season over and the arrival of Autumn, the outbreak seems to be firmly on the wane, for this year at least. Notwithstanding the



Plate 32. Gentoo Penguin. © Andrew Miller



Plate 33. Year-old Black-browed Albatross. © Andrew Miller

losses, I think there is satisfaction here that Bird Flu has been managed efficiently and that far worse outcomes have been avoided. We now await the next turn of the handle with the next migration and breeding season and hope that the Northern Hemisphere trend is not repeated - that of the second year of Bird Flu being worse than the first.

On a different note, Bird Flu has not been the only challenge for the breeding birds of the islands. A reduction in rainfall over the last few years has led to significant drying out of the top soil and peat beds in many areas, leaving the terrain vulnerable to wildfires - particularly on offshore islands where it is difficult - or impossible - to bring firefighting effort to bear. This emergent threat was underscored when fire broke out on uninhabited Bird Island, a hugely important breeding site for Slender-billed Prions *Pachyptila desolata*, possibly holding 30% of the total global population. Fortunately, the Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chryocome* and Black-browed Albatross colonies escaped the worst of the fires but, for the prions, the devastation was complete. Fortunately a later fire, caused by a lightning strike, which broke out on Sealion Island was brought under control following a significant deployment of emergency service personnel, under the leadership of the Falkland Islands Fire and Rescue Service.

All of which links me back to happier matters - a look at the birds of Sealion Island - with this snapshot being based on an October visit last year. This review only attempts to cover the routine species that an observer visiting the island for a couple of days would almost certainly see at that time of year but, as is the case anywhere in the Falkland Islands, you can never know what might turn up, with the 'oddy' during my visit being a Chilean Swallow *Tachycineta leucopyga* working the insects over a couple of the island's ponds. About 3 square miles in area, Sealion Island is a Ramsar site, Important Bird Area and National Nature Reserve. The small settlement, with its lodge, lies near the eastern end of the island, with a rough airstrip alongside. On disembarking from the Falkland Islands Government Air Service (FIGAS) 'Islander' aircraft, visitors do so under the watchful gaze of the resident group of Striated Caracara *Phalacrocorax australis*. These extremely tame and inquisitive raptors have to be watched carefully, especially when packed lunches or anything shiny is involved, as they will have away with them in a jiffy given half a chance. Other resident raptors on the island are Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus* and Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*.





Plate 34. Rockhopper Penguins. © Chris Moorey

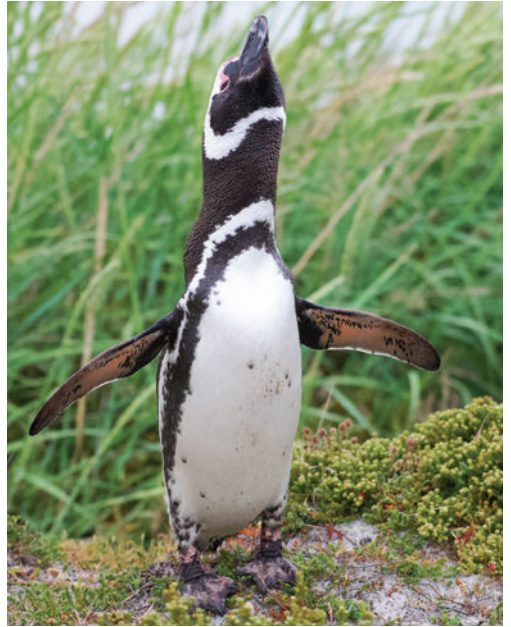


Plate 35. Magellanic Penguin. © Andrew Miller



Plate 36. Crested Caracara. © Chris Moorey



Plate 37. Short-eared Owl. © Andrew Miller



Plate 38. Cobb's Wren. © Andrew Miller



Plate 39. Falkland Steamer Duck. © Andrew Miller

Immediately to the east of the lodge are a number of Gentoo Penguin and Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* colonies, with the former being very much in the majority. Where footpaths through the clumps of tussac grass used by humans and penguins intersect, signs remind us humans that penguins have right of way - and we dutifully stand aside and let them pass on their way to and from the sea - much to the delight of my grandchildren when they visited! Unfortunately, one of the Gentoo colonies near the lodge fell victim to Bird Flu this year and suffered significant mortality, in turn leading to the closure of the island to visitors for much of the summer. The island's rat-free status is immediately obvious in the relative abundance of passerines when, especially on calm and sunny days, Cobb's Wren *Troglodytes cobbi* (endemic to the Falkland Islands), Grass Wren *Cistothorus platensis*, Blackish Cinclodes *Cinclodes antarcticus* (known as Tussac-bird in the islands), Austral Thrush *Turdus falcklandii*, Dark-faced Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola maclovianus maclovianus*, Long-tailed Meadowlark *Leistes loyca* and White-bridled Finch *Melanodera melanodera* all compete to make themselves heard.

In terms of wildfowl, in early summer a walk around the island's ponds and coastline will serve up large numbers of Patagonian Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides* and Falkland Steamer Duck *Tachyeres brachypterus* (the other Falkland Islands



Plate 40. Two-banded Plover. © Andrew Miller



Plate 41. White-rumped Sandpiper. © Andrew Miller



Plate 42. Rufous-chested Dotterel. © Andrew Miller



Plate 43. Magalenic Snipe. © Andrew Miller



endemic species), along with Speckled Teal *Anas flavirostris*, the ubiquitous Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta leucoptera*, Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps*, Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida malvinarum* and Chiloe Wigeon *Mareca sibilatrix*.

Whilst on the beaches enjoying the antics, sounds (and distinct aromas!) of the island's healthy populations of Southern Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonina* and Southern Sea Lion *Otaria flavescens*, or enjoying watching one of the frequently-seen pods of Killer Whale *Orcinus Orca* close offshore, visitors will be joined on the beaches by Snowy Sheathbill *Chionis albus*, Magellanic Oystercatcher *Haematopus leucopodus*, Two-banded Plover *Charadrius falklandicus* and White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* - and a telescope is not needed to enjoy good views of Black-browed Albatross, Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, Antarctic Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*, Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*, Dolphin Gull *Leucophaeus scoresbii*, Brown-hooded Gull *Chroicocephalus maculipennis* and South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea* as they ride the winds offshore.

In order to see the rest of the island it is worth setting aside a full day to explore the interior and western end of the island, being sure to visit the Southern Rockhopper Penguin colony at Bull Hill, right next to the HMS *Sheffield* memorial and also the nearby Imperial Cormorant *Phalacrocorax atriceps* colony. A walk across the island will be rewarded with sightings of both Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus* and Magellanic Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiiae* amongst the diddle dee *Empetrum rubrum* heather and tussac grass clumps. As an aside, the Falkland Islands are thought to support around 20% of the world's tussac grass and a significant re-planting programme is underway.

I will conclude there - but not before saying that I am expecting to be based here in the Falkland Islands until late 2026. My contact details are on the inside back cover, so please contact me if you are paying these wonderful islands a visit, even if only for a day with a cruise ship!

**Cdr Chris Moorey, RN**  
Email: [cmoorey@sec.gov.fk](mailto:cmoorey@sec.gov.fk)

## Appendix 1.

### List of species mentioned in the text

Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua*  
Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*  
Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrycomye*  
Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*  
Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*  
Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*  
Slender-billed Prion *Pachyptila desolata*  
Imperial Cormorant *Phalacrocorax atriceps*  
Snowy Sheathbill *Chionis albus*  
Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrycomye*  
Patagonian Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides*  
Falkland Steamer Duck *Tachyeres brachypterus*  
Speckled Teal *Anas flavirostris*  
Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta*  
Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps*  
Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida*  
Chiloe Wigeon *Mareca sibilatrix*  
Magellanic Oystercatcher *Haematopus leucopodus*  
Two-banded Plover *Charadrius falklandicus*  
Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus*  
Magellanic Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiiae*

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*  
Antarctic Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*  
Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*  
Dolphin Gull *Leucophaeus scoresbii*  
Brown-hooded Gull *Chroicocephalus maculipennis*  
South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea*  
Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*  
Striated Caracara *Phalacrocorax australis*  
Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus*  
Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*  
Chilean Swallow *Tachycineta leucopyga*  
Cobb's Wren *Troglodytes cobbi*  
Grass Wren *Cistothorus platensis*  
Blackish Cinclodes *Cinclodes antarcticus*  
Austral Thrush *Turdus falklandii*  
Dark-faced Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola maclovianus*  
Long-tailed Meadowlark *Leistes loyca*  
White-browed Finch *Melanodera melanodera*  
**Animals**  
Southern Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonina*  
Southern Sea Lion *Otaria flavescens*  
Killer Whale *Orcinus Orca*



# Birding 'Down Under' New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands November–December 2022

by Dr Nigel Hacking

*(All plates by the author)*

## 4–20th December 2022: Heritage Adventurer Route

Around the South and South Eastern Submerged Continent of Zealandia

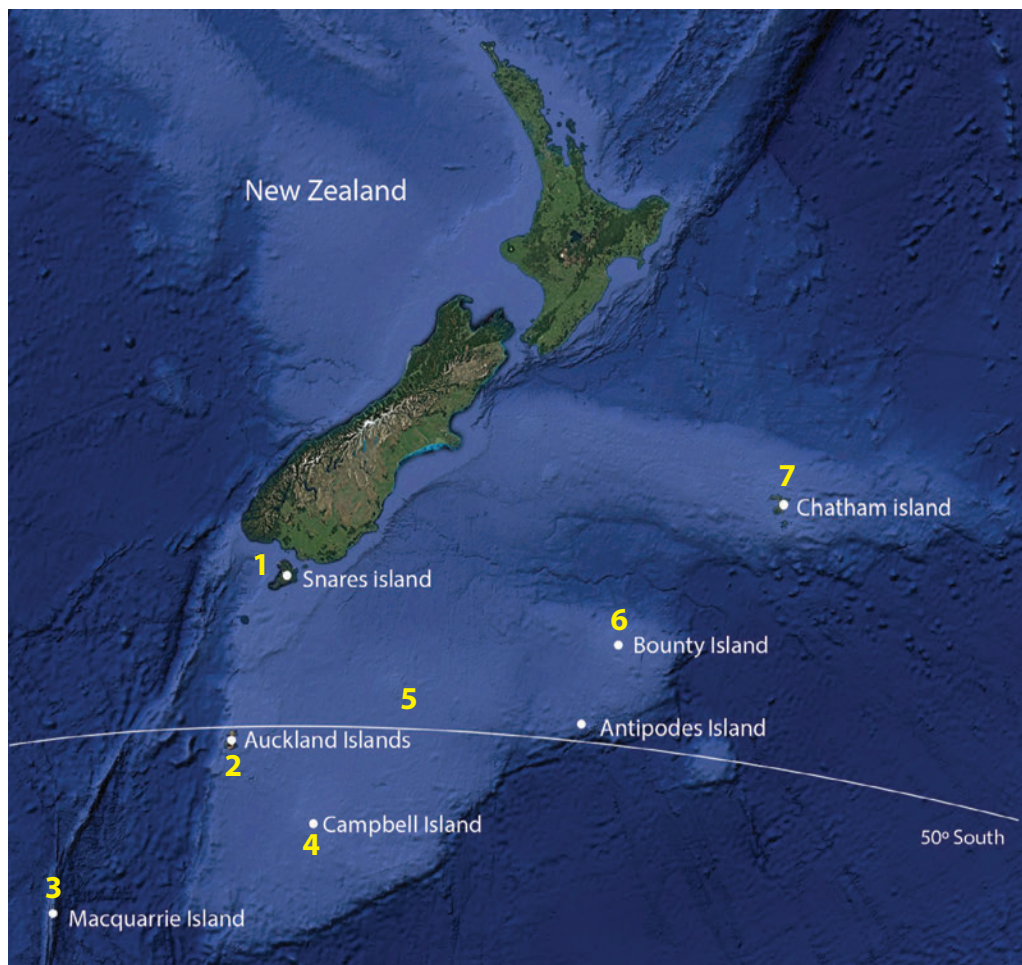


Figure 1. Map of Zealandia. © Google Earth

1. Snares Island
2. Auckland Islands
3. Macquarrie Island
4. Campbell Island
5. Antipodes Island
6. Bounty Island
7. Chatham Island

My good friend, and fellow RNBWS member Phil Agland has for many years encouraged me to visit New Zealand's Subantarctic islands to further my knowledge of penguins, albatrosses and tubenoses and so after our success on the Western Pacific Odyssey of 2019 (*Sea Swallow 69*), we decided to travel again with Heritage Expeditions on one of their Birding Down Under cruises.

The Heritage Adventurer is Heritage Expeditions new expedition cruise boat. It has a capacity for 140 customers. The crew number 94 and there were about a dozen expedition staff.



**Plate 44.** Boarding the Heritage Adventurer at Bluff Harbour.

Prof Peter Ryan, recently retired Director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, based in Cape Town was the senior bird guide and assisted by Mike Sylvia, an excellent birder and bird photographer from the USA at present living in West Ireland.

Peter is a world authority on seabirds, especially Prions and has spent many years researching seabirds in the Tristan Group as well as other Southern Ocean bird hotspots. He gave a series of lectures during our trip looking on nomenclature and classification as well as seabird evolution and patterns of behaviour in breeding seabirds.

#### **4th December**

Sea watching from the bridge wings and rear decks with about 10 other keen birders. Mottled and White-headed Petrels were new as well as good numbers of Sooty Shearwaters, Cook's and Common Diving Petrels. Albatrosses were ever present during the next 17 days with good numbers of White-capped and a few Southern Royal and Gibson's (Wandering) Albatrosses being seen on this first evening. Both Fairy and the much more robust Broad-billed Prion were identified.



Plate 45. Southern Royal Albatross.



Plate 46. White-headed Petrel.



Plate 47. Broad-billed Prion.



Plate 48. Fairy Prion.

### 5th December: Snares Island, 48° 02' S 166° 53' E 200 km south of Bluff

Snares Crested Penguins surrounded our ship and porpoised around the 10 or so Zodiacs that were lowered into the water for our cruise around the sheltered east coast of the main island. We visited Penguin slope where hundreds of SC Penguins were jumping in and out of the gentle surf.

Bull Kelp fringed the shore. Thousands of Cape Petrels were on the surface of the water at many points eating copepods and other surface-dwelling plankton. This plankton also fed large schools of bait fish which the penguins and a single Buller's Albatross (nominat race) were actively feeding on. Continuing around the coast towards Broughton Island we saw many Tomtits of the black Snares subsp (*dannefaerdi*) as well as a single Snares subspecies of the Fernbird (*caudatus*). A few Eastern Rockhopper Penguins were seen in a small colony on the rocks.



Figure 2. Snares Island. © Ikonact (Wikipedia Commons)



The number of breeding pairs of numerous seabird species on the Snares are staggering. Around 2–3 million Sooty Shearwaters are thought to breed on these Islands and landing is strictly prohibited as it is on many of these Sub-Antarctic Islands. 8,700 Buller's Albatross, 10,000 Mottled Petrel, 250,000 Common Diving Petrels, 7,500 Cape Petrels, 5,000 Broad-billed and 4,000 Fairy Penguins are estimated in addition to 23,000 Snares Crested Penguins. A truly remarkable seabird paradise.

We then sailed close to the Western Chain Islands. These hold the second largest breeding colony of Salvin's Albatross (1,200 pairs) and hundreds of these birds were seen feeding around tidal rushes at the base of the islands along with hundreds of Sooty Shearwaters.

At sea our first Wandering and Gibson's Antipodean Albatrosses were seen. Peter Ryan was at hand to give us tips on these and all other seabird identifications.

We underwent biosecurity checks of all our clothing and anything else we were planning to take ashore the following day. This became a routine before all landings to reduce the risk of introducing alien plant seeds, ants and infection. Our boots were disinfected and our backpacks vacuum cleaned.



Plate 49. Snares Crested Penguins.



Plate 50. Buller's Albatross.



Plate 51. Snares Island (ssp) Tomtit.



Plate 52. Cape Petrel.



Plate 53. Sooty Shearwaters.



Plate 54. Mottled Petrel.



Plate 55. Gibson's (Wandering) Albatross.



Plate 56. Snowy (Wandering) Albatross.

**6th December: Enderby Island, Auckland Island Group. 50° 49' S 166° 29E 460 km south of Bluff**



Figure 3. Auckland Island group. © Google Earth

Seabirds mainly breed here on the predator free Enderby, Disappointment and Adams Islands, along with several small islets. Introduced pigs, rats and especially cats played havoc with seabird colonies and still do on the main island. Antarctic Prions were said to number in the millions, but now around 10,000–30,000 pairs remain. Approximately 184,000 White-headed Petrels breed as do large numbers of Common Diving Petrel and significant populations of Black-bellied and Grey-backed Storm-petrels.

The majority of the world's 5,250 pairs of Gibson's Albatross nest here, along with around 97,000 pairs of White-capped and 120 pairs of Southern Royal and 5,000 pairs of Light-mantled Sooty Albatross. Approximately 570 pairs of Yellow-eyed Penguins breed, the world's rarest penguin. 1,000 pairs of Auckland Shags, 1,300 Auckland Teal, 3,000 pairs of Eastern Rockhopper Penguin are thought to breed throughout the islands.





Plate 57. Yellow-eyed Penguin.



Plate 58. Auckland Shag.

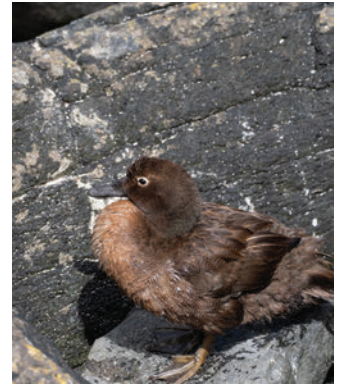


Plate 59. Auckland Teal.



Plate 60. Sub-Antarctic Snipe.



Plate 61. Red-crowned Parakeet.



Plate 62. New Zealand Falcon.

We landed at Sandy Bay on Enderby Island in the north of the group. This is well known breeding beach for Hooker's Sealions, the world's rarest Sealion species. About half a dozen beachmaster males were holding court on the beach and a few females had come to shore and were due to pup around Christmas Day.

A 9 km walk was taken around the island ending on a board walk through a Southern Royal Albatross colony. Many Yellow-eyed Penguins were seen on the beach, in the dunes as well as in the rich patches of unique Megaherb vegetation. Whilst there were about a dozen hard core birders on our trip there were many more Penguin enthusiasts and many botanists. New Zealand Falcon, the Auckland race of the Sub-Antarctic Snipe were seen as were Auckland Island Shags, Auckland Teal, Tomtits, Red-crowned Parakeets, showing a little yellow on the crown as well as red. New Zealand Pipits (*ssp aucklandii*) were common and confiding. Brown Skuas were nesting in many areas. Tui and Bellbird were very common over our heads as we lunched in the mature Rata Forest. Tomtits were also common (*subsp marrineri*) and very different to the ones we had seen on Snares Island. Two pairs of Light-mantled Sooty albatrosses were seen at close range from the clifftop walk and a single vagrant Pacific Swift flew over. Interestingly this was still present on 27th Dec when Peter Ryan revisited Enderby Island with another group.

Having Southern Royal Albatrosses flying a few metres in front of us as we slowly walked along the boardwalk through their colony was a highlight. My only camera malfunction of the trip occurred at this point however.



That evening at sea, sailing further South towards Macquarie Island we saw more Wandering Albatrosses. Antarctic Prions took over as the ubiquitous Prion Species for the next few days. White-chinned Petrels were common and there was usually one or two following in our wake along with Light Mantled Sooty Albatrosses, Cape Pigeons (Petrels) and the occasional Black-bellied Storm-petrel as well as Grey-backed Storm-petrels. Our first confirmed Campbell Albatross was seen this evening, showing an angrier face and a honey-coloured eye compared to the more widespread Black-browed Albatross. These were seen most days until we were well north of Campbell Island itself.



**Plate 63.** Campbell Albatross.



**Plate 64.** Campbell Albatross.



**Plate 65.** Grey-backed Storm-petrel.



**Plate 66.** Black-bellied Storm-petrel.



**Plate 67.** Light-mantled Sooty Albatross.



**Plate 68.** White-chinned Petrel.

## 7th December

At sea towards Macquarie Island. The same species were seen in good numbers. Brown Skua and Northern Giant Petrel were commonly seen.

## 8th December: Macquarie Island. 54° 64' S, 158° 86' E

Macquarie Island is about 34 km long and 5 km wide. It is almost equidistant from the island of Tasmania and the Antarctic continent about 630 km south-west of Auckland Island. It has been a Tasmanian State Reserve (since 1900) and a World Heritage Site (from 1997), so Australian Tourist Visas were required. Between 1810 and 1919, seals and then penguins were hunted for their oil almost to the point of extinction.

As we anchored both Royal and King Penguins were porpoising all around the ship and several Macquarie Shags flew by.

Macquarie Island, the South Georgia of these waters teems with seabirds. Estimates for the penguins are Royal (850,000 pairs), King (100,000 pairs), Eastern Rockhopper (100,000–500,000), Gentoo (3,800 pairs). Both Grey-headed (100 pairs) and Light Mantled Sooty Albatross (1,300 pairs) nest here. There are around 760 pairs of endemic Macquarie Shags.

We landed at Sandy Bay in the morning in persistent rain, but by the afternoon the rain stopped. The beach teemed with Royal and King Penguins. Numerous Elephant seal pups, known as weaners, were on the beach as well as a number of female adult and young males. These were loafing on the beach moulting their skins. Steam came off the warm masses of blubber huddled together. The young males had frequent sparring fights as did the weaners.

Southern Giant Petrels, including many white morphs were on the beach with smaller numbers of Northern Giant Petrels that were also nesting up in the tussock grass by the boardwalk to the huge Royal Penguin nesting colony.

Brown Skuas, Northern and Southern Giant Petrels patrolled the huge Royal Penguin colony. Redpolls were in evidence and excited the Aussie birders as this is the only place that they can add Redpoll to their Aussie birdlists.

The only Gentoo Penguins of the *taeniata* subspecies were seen here. A shallow lagoon allowed the weaner Elephant Seals to learn to swim in safety away from any hungry Killer Whales. We saw 2 huge finned male Killer Whales patrolling the beach as we reboarded the Heritage Adventurer after our second landing.



Figure 4. Macquarie Island. © Google Earth



Plate 69. Royal Penguins.



Plate 70. King Penguins.

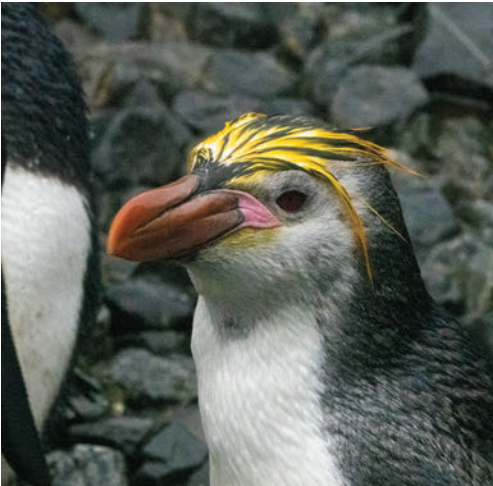




**Plate 71.** Macquarie Shag.



**Plate 72.** Royal Penguins.



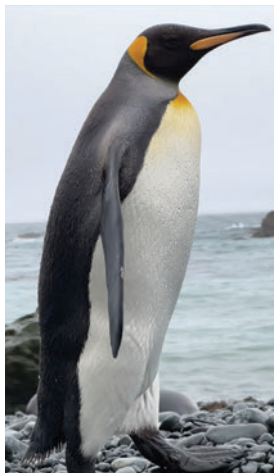
**Plate 73.** Royal Penguins.



**Plate 74.** Elephant Seal with penguins.



**Plate 75.** Brown Skua patrolling Royal Penguin colony.



**Plate 76.** The King of Penguins.



**Plate 77.** and showing his true colours.





**Plate 78.** Southern Giant Petrel (white morph).



**Plate 79.** Northern and Southern Giant Petrel.



**Plate 80.** Gentoo Penguins.



**Plate 81.** Two male Killer Whales.



**Plate 82.** A King pair.

### **9th December**

The Ship headed south along the coast of Macquarie to anchor off Lusitania Bay. We had a Zodiac cruise close to the beach where the largest King Penguin colony is situated. These Penguins are present in vast numbers and are seen alongside abandoned boilers (Try Pots) used to render down seals and penguins for their oil. A couple of colonies of Eastern Rockhopper Penguin were seen, but a significant swell prevented us getting close to the shore. We then sailed back up to the Isthmus in the far north of the island and the site of the Australian research station, but our planned landing and walk was cancelled as the swell was too high. A Black-browed Albatross circled close to our ship as we waited to see if a landing was possible.

Another family of Killer Whales was seen with a male, 2 females and a young one.

We then set sail for Campbell Island.



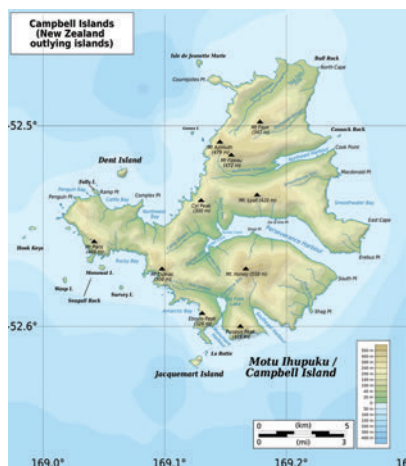
**Plate 83.** King Penguin Colony at Lusitania Bay with rusty iron Try Pots.



**Plate 84.** Black-browed Albatross with Antarctic Tern.

### 10th December

Day at sea. Good numbers of seabirds including small groups of Eastern Rockhopper Penguin far from land.



**Figure 5.** Campbell Island. © Ikonact (Wikipedia Commons)

**11th December: Campbell Island. 52° 53'S, 169° 14'E**  
660km south of Bluff, New Zealand's southernmost subantarctic territory.

Six species of Albatross breed here. This is the only breeding location for around 21,000 pairs of Campbell Albatrosses. They nest either alone or in mixed colonies with about 6,600 pairs of Grey Headed Albatross. Black-browed Albatross also breed in small numbers. 1,600 pairs of Light mantled Albatrosses breed. Campbell is the main site for around 8,700 pairs of Southern Royal Albatross and Antipodean Albatross also breed in smaller numbers. Yellow-eyed Penguin have their main breeding population here with around 1,300 birds counted and around 33,000 Eastern Rockhoppers breed. Campbell Island used to hold the world's largest population of almost 800,000, but this population has crashed since the 1940s.

It is estimated that around 8,000 Campbell Shags breed here. The Campbell Island Snipe, a distinct island endemic sub species of the Sub-Antarctic Snipe was discovered as recently as 1979 on an isolated and inaccessible rock. Rat eradication on Campbell in 2001 was followed by a concerted search for the snipe. Around 30 individuals were found in 2006 and they appear to be increasing in numbers now. Campbell Teal are also doing well with around 200 mature individuals when last counted.

Our ship anchored in Perseverance Bay. We took a Zodiac ride around the bay and out into the open sea in the morning. Campbell Teal, Campbell Shag and numerous Light-mantled Sooty Albatross were nesting on low cliffs around the bay. Antarctic Terns and New Zealand penguins of the *aucklandii* sub spp were common.

1km out to sea a feeding frenzy with 50–60 Sooty Shearwaters, Campbell, Black-browed, Grey Headed and Southern Royal Albatross were joined by Wilson's Storm-petrels, Cape Petrels, a tight group of Campbell Shags and even a couple of Yellow-eyed Penguins all very close to the Zodiac.





Plate 85. Antarctic Terns.



Plate 86. Eastern Rockhopper Penguin.

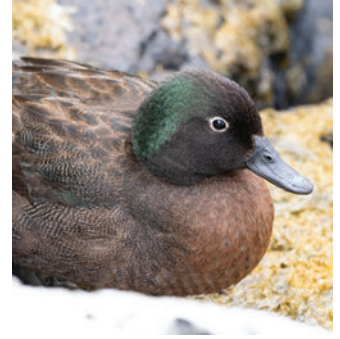


Plate 87. Campbell Teal.



Plate 88. Light-mantled Sooty Albatross on nest.



Plate 89. Campbell Shag.



Plate 90. Campbell Island Pipit (*aucklandii* spp).



Plate 91. Campbell Shags.



Plate 92. Sooty Shearwater.



Plate 93. Wilson's Storm-petrel.

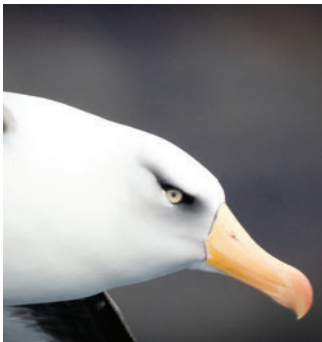


Plate 94. Campbell Albatross.

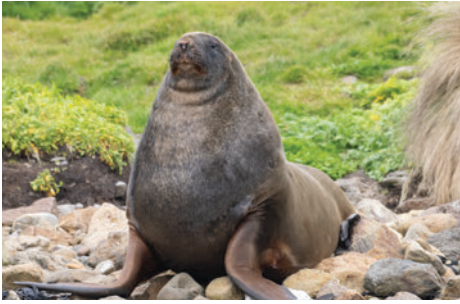


Plate 95. Grey-headed Albatross.



Plate 96. Southern Royal Albatross.





**Plate 97.** Hooker's Sealions.

Several sizeable colonies of Hooker's Sealions were on the beaches and many territorial males were holding court.

We took an afternoon walk up a long boardwalk to a large colony of Southern Royal Albatross. There were many sitting birds right next to the path as well as courting pairs and larger groups of unpaired birds all practising their courtship rituals.



**Plate 98.** Male with harem.

A Campbell Island Sub-Antarctic Snipe was flushed by me and photographed close to the jetty in Tussock grass and Phil saw another at close range at the top of the boardwalk.

The unique Megaherbs were pretty spectacular on Campbell and a fellow passenger also pointed out 2 species of Orchid as we descended the boardwalk.

As we left Campbell the Heritage Adventurer passed close to the amazing densely packed Campbell Albatross colony at the North Cape as we left headed for Antipodes Island in the evening.



**Plate 99.** Southern Royal Albatross colony.



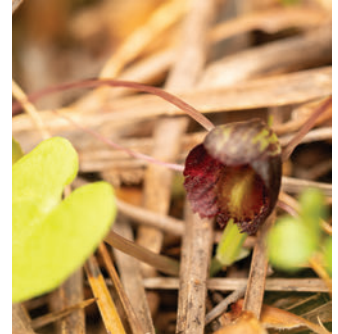
**Plate 100.** Southern Royal Albatross colony.



**Plate 101.** Southern Royal Albatross.



**Plate 102.** Campbell (Sub-Antarctic) Snipe.



**Plate 103.** (left) Ross Lily. **Plate 104.** (middle) Campbell Is. Carrot. **Plate 105.** (right) Spider Orchid (*Corybas trilobas*).



**Plate 106.** North Cape Campbell Albatross colony from the ship as we left Campbell Island.

**12th December: At sea**

No further Snowy Albatrosses seen, but both Gibson's and Antipodean type Albatrosses seen alongside Southern Royal, Campbell and Light Mantled Albatrosses. Our first Northern Royal Albatross was seen as well as a few Salvin's Albatrosses and there was a sizeable group of Petrels and Shearwaters as well as several Albatross species above a feeding pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales. Black-bellied Storm-petrels and Cape Petrels, many Prions and Sooty Shearwaters were common.



**Plate 107.** Long-finned Pilot Whale.



**Plate 108.** Gibson's Albatross.



**Plate 109.** Antipodean type (Wandering) Albatross.



**Plate 110.** Royal Northern Albatross.





Plate 111. Black-bellied Storm-petrel.



Plate 112. Salvin's Albatross.

**13th December: Antipodes Island. 49° 68S, 178°78'E**

800km from South Island, the most remote and youngest of the subantarctic islands. Diametrically opposite London on the planet. A high plateau and coastline surrounded by massive cliffs. Numerous Albatrosses were in rafts as we approached our sheltered anchorage.

Antipodean Albatrosses of the *antipodensis* spp were mixed in with Black-browed, White-capped and Light-mantled Albatrosses. Around 6,300 pairs of Antipodean Albatross pairs nest on this island, but the population is in trouble with fewer and fewer females available to breed. Food shortages from warming sea around the island mean the females are feeding further north and east than the males in seas with more commercial long lines and so the sex ratio is changing. It is now around 2 males to every female. Overall numbers of this species are dropping by around 12% per year and a 50% loss in numbers was seen between 2004–2014. The Antipodean Albatross has been up listed to 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List for this reason. Same sex male pairs are being reported more and more as seen clearly on the recent Frozen Planet II BBC documentary. Young Antipodean Albatrosses were seen high on the top of the cliffs flapping their wings, presumably before their first fledging flights.

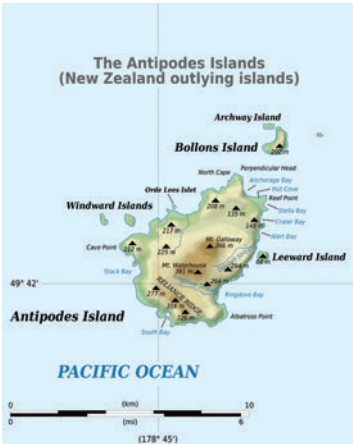


Figure 6. Antipodes Island. © Matthew Edwards (Wikipedia Commons)



Plate 113. Antipodes in the sun.





**Plate 114.** Antipodean Albatross in flight.



**Plate 115.** Antipodean Albatross on the sea.

Once again clear blue sky and light winds and a small 1m swell greeted us for our Zodiac trip around the main island.

Erect Crested Penguins (34,000 pairs) were everywhere and in some colonies were mixed in with Eastern Rockhopper Penguins. Following the eradication of mice from the islands in 2016 the 4 land bird species have done well. Both endemic Reischek's and Antipodean Parakeets were seen well as was the *steindachneri* subsp of the New Zealand Pipit.

Parakeets have evolved into several different taxa on the Sub-Antarctic Islands. Whilst Red-crowned Parakeets have several subspecies on these islands there are 3 full species. Both Antipodes (2,000–3,000 individuals) and Reischek's (4,000–6,000 individuals) are endemic to Antipodes Islands whereas Forbes' Parakeet is confined to a couple of the Chatham Islands.

A very confiding Pipit was seen to be loading up with invertebrates on sea washed rocks. Peter Ryan was intrigued as there are very few species of passerine that can tolerate salt laden prey such as these. An out of range and fairly immobile Leopard Seal was stretched out on a rock, being pestered by a couple of Northern Giant Petrels, suspecting that it might be dying. Numerous Fur Seals and a single Elephant Seal were present.

Fairy or possibly Fulmar Prions were seen under arches and in and out of sea caves and even settled on the rocks. Both species nest here and there was much argument and disagreement amongst birders and guides as to the identification of 3 such pairs of Prions seen on and above the rocks in the middle of the day. Fairy Prions should only come to their breeding sites at night, but Fulmar Prions are thought to come during the day. A fresh dead Grey-backed Storm-petrel fell next to our Zodiac from a cave entrance, possibly crashed into by a Prion whilst we were watching. Cape Petrels were seen in good numbers again forming rafts on the calm sea.

Seabird numbers here are again staggering. The estimated numbers of breeding pairs of Petrel are 200,000 Common Diving, 100,000 White-headed and White-chinned, 10,000 Grey and 3,500 Soft-plumaged Petrel. 100,000 Subantarctic and 1,000 Sooty Shearwater pairs are also thought to breed here.

Leaving the Antipodes and sailing NE at sunset the sky above the sea was alive with seabirds. Good numbers of Soft-plumaged, White-chinned and White-headed Petrels as well as large numbers of Sooty Shearwaters and others birds were seen.



Plate 116. Zodiac Cruise in fine weather.



Plate 117. Antipodean Pipit (spp *steindachneri*).



Plate 118. Erect Crested Penguin.



Plate 119. Eastern Rockhopper (upper) and Erect-crested Penguin.



Plate 120. Leopard Seal.



Plate 121. New Zealand Fur Seals.



Plate 122. Antipodes Islands Parakeet.



Plate 123. Reischek's Parakeet.





Plate 124. Fulmar or Fairy Prion.



Plate 125. Grey-backed Storm-petrel.



Plate 126. Leaving Antipodes Island.



Plate 127. Soft-plumaged Petrel.

**14th December: Bounty Island. 47° 43S, 179° 5'E**

This is a group of around 20 low lying islands 220km north of Antipodes Island, 700km from South Island.

It is the main breeding island for Salvin's Albatross (76,000 pairs), Erect Crested Penguin (26,000 pairs) and Fulmar Prion (30,000 pairs). Bounty Shags number around 1,100 and form a superspecies with Campbell and Auckland Shags. Bounty Shags are said to be the world's rarest Shags.

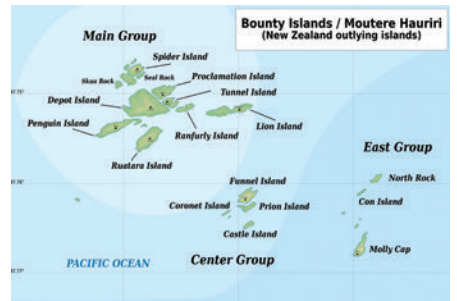


Figure 7. Bounty Island. © Ikonact (Wikipedia Commons)



Plate 128. Bounty Island Shags.





Plate 129. Salvin's Albatrosses.



Plate 130. Fulmar Prion.



Plate 131. Erect-crested Penguin.

We arrived in heavy fog, but luckily the fog lifted as we anchored and we were able to have a leisurely Zodiac Cruise in amongst these low-lying islands. Large numbers of Erect crested Penguins were present both on land and around our Zodiacs. Small rafts of the rare Bounty Island Shag swam close to our craft and Fulmar Prions darted overhead. Several of the islands were covered in nesting Salvin's Albatross which also filled the skies about our little boats. This is also one of the strongholds for the New Zealand Fur Seal and many pups were present alongside mature females and a few large bulls. The fog then descended and we returned to the ship, happy to see its faint outline appear in the mist.

After leaving the Bounty Islands behind we headed towards the Chathams. Bollom's Rise to our East seems to be the feeding site for the rare Chatham Islands Petrel and so we were on the lookout for this endangered species for the next few days.

We did see good numbers of Sub-Antarctic Shearwaters and our first Buller's Shearwaters, Grey-faced Petrels were seen in good numbers over the next few days. Grey-backed Storm-petrels were seen on floating Kelp on several occasions and White-faced Storm-petrels were replacing the more southerly Black-belled Stormies. The northern, grey crowned form of Buller's Albatross were added to the mix of Salvin's and Northern Royal Albatrosses.



Plate 132. Sub-Antarctic Shearwater.



Plate 133. Buller's Shearwater.



Plate 134. Grey-backed Storm-petrel.



Plate 135. Grey-faced Petrel.

**15th December: Pyramid Rock. 44°43S, 176° 24W**

Those out on the bridge early were greeted with our first Chatham Albatrosses and a couple of close Northern Royal Albatrosses with a few Buller's Shearwaters along with the usual mixture of seabirds seen most days. As we approached Pyramid Rock itself, which loomed ahead out of the sea we saw huge numbers of White-faced Storm-petrels which had been seen in small numbers at sea. Hundreds were now visible at a time as were rafts of thousands of Sooty Shearwater. White-fronted Terns flew over our ship, along with Cape Petrels and Northern Giant Petrels and Brown Skuas.

At the Rock itself which lies 11km south of Pitt Island, thousands of Chatham Albatrosses filled the sky, were in rafts of 100's on the sea and could be seen nesting all over the Pyramid itself including in a huge cave. Around 4,600 pairs are thought to breed on the rock, at present their only known breeding site, although attempts at starting a breeding island on the main island are underway.

A few endemic Pitt Shags were seen around the lower reaches of the rock and feeding in the swell and in the fringing Bull kelp. Population estimates for Pitt Shags throughout the Chatham Islands give numbers at around 729 pairs.





**Plate 136.** Chatham Albatross.



**Plate 137.** Chatham Albatross.



**Plate 138.** White-faced Storm-petrel.



**Plate 139.** White-fronted Tern.



**Plate 140.** Pyramid Rock.



**Plate 141.** Rafts of Chatham Island with a single Northern Royal Albatross.

We left the Pyramid and in a little over an hour had reached SE Island (Rangatira). After anchoring, a Zodiac Cruise was arranged around the island. A single Little Blue Penguin gave close views as we motored towards the island. Over 20 endangered and extremely rare, endemic Shore Plovers were seen at close range, including a completely white individual. This represented about 10% of the world population. Three Chatham Oystercatchers were also seen. Red-crowned Parakeets showed well as did Brown Skuas, but sadly there was no sign of any Black Robins which hung on in tiny numbers on Mangere Island and now have their stronghold on SE Island. Close views of Pitt Shags were obtained and several Swamp harriers were seen over the island.





Plate 142. Shore Plover, male.



Plate 143. Shore Plover, female.



Plate 144. Pitt Shag.



Plate 145. Chatham Island Oystercatcher.

We then headed towards Chatham Island itself, cruising past Little and Big Mangere Islands. Although a few Parakeets could be seen in the distance these was no chance of identifying Forbes Parakeet from about 1km offshore. No Magenta Petrels were seen at sea. Buller's Albatrosses of the *platei* (*Pacific Albatross*) subspecies were quite common around the small fishing boats around Pitt and the Mangere Islands. A few distant Chatham Island Shags were seen.

**16th December: Chatham Island. 43° 89S, 176° 50'W**

At present it is thought that 5,800 pairs of Northern Royal and 16,800 Northern Buller's Albatross nest on the Forty-fours and Sisters islands east and north of Chatham Island. As many as 350,000 pairs of Broad-billed Prions and 50,000 pairs of Fairy Prions nest mainly on these off shore islands. A possible new species of 'Pyramid' Prion nest on Pyramid rock itself, but we didn't see any Prions there, despite looking. Also 180,000 Common Diving Petrel, 30,000 Sooty Shearwaters, around 250 Chatham Islands Petrels, 500 Black-winged Petrels breed.

Introduced predators, including Stoats, Possums, Cats, Rats, Starlings and Weka have led to around a dozen landbird extinctions on the Chathams. However Endemic Chatham Island Oystercatchers, Shore Plover,



Figure 8. Chatham Island. © Alexrk (Wikipedia Commons)

Chatham Snipe, Chatham and Pitt Shags, Forbes Parakeet, Chatham Island Pigeon and Chatham Gerygone persist and the Chatham Island Black Robin has increased from just 5 individuals with one female, named 'Old Blue' up to about 300 now.

The incredibly rare Magenta Petrel (Taiko) is one of the stars of the show on the Chathams. The Chatham Taiko was hunted to near extinction by Polynesian settlers and was first recognised by science when a single specimen was taken at sea in 1867 from the Italian ship - Magenta. Bill Bourne speculated that this petrel and the Taiko might be the same species. It was rediscovered as recently as 1987 using spotlighting at night. Radio collars allowed its burrows to be discovered in remaining forest scrub in the south of Chatham Island in the Tuko Nature Reserve. Land to form this reserve was donated to the Government of NZ by Manuel and Evelyn Tuanui in 1978.

A 2.4ha Covenanted hilltop was further gifted by the present farmers, Liz and Bruce Tuanui close to the Tuko reserve which was then fenced off with an 800-metre predator-proof fence in 2006. The forest inside the fence has rapidly regenerated. 60 Taiko chicks were collected from the scattered colony inside the Tuko Nature Reserve Forest between 2007–2011 and placed into man made burrows dug into the soft ground under trees and ferns in the newly created Sweetwater reserve. Taiko and Chatham Island Petrel calls are played through loud speakers at night to attract passing breeding pairs to settle inside the fenced area, rather than in the larger Tuko reserve. Intensive predator trapping occurs in both areas and the Sweetwater Reserve is now predator free. Dave Boyle, now supervises this project and through RNBWS contacts (Stephen Chapman) I was able to arrange a supervised visit to the reserve. He had 3 satellite tagged males who he hoped would be returning to their burrows around about the time we were visiting. If birds were present, then it was time for him to catch, measure and remove these tags. We might just be in luck.

We anchored in the bay off Waitangi. It was strange to see buildings and signs of habitation after being in such remote places for the last 2 weeks. We were transferred by Zodiac to the Wharfe, where we landed and were transferred by bus through the country to the Awatotara Private Reserve, owned and run by Bruce and Liz Tuanui. After an introduction about 30 of us were transferred in 4-wheel drive vehicles across their private farm to the Sweetwater Sanctuary.



**Plate 146.** GPS locator removed.

Having missed them at sea it was a great pleasure to be able to see a non-breeding pair in the hand at point blank range. Luckily one of the 3 tagged males had returned with his new mate to their burrow the previous night and were still in residence that morning. The male had his transmitter carefully removed and then we all given a brief view before he was placed back in his burrow.

We paid \$200 a head for the privilege of seeing the birds in the hand and so over \$6,000 was raised on the day for the Taiko conservation project.





Plate 147. Magenta (Taiko) Petrel.



Plate 148. Chatham Pigeon.



Plate 149. Liz Tuanui with Dave Boyle.

Chatham Petrels had also taken up residence in adjoining burrows, but sadly all were out at sea and none were available for viewing. Common Diving Petrels were also using the sea, but were struggling with competition for burrows with the more aggressive Broad-billed Prions.

We were also shown the site of the Taiko Trust's new protected Chatham Island Albatross colony at Point Gap, also on the Tuanui farm. 300 chicks have been translocated and reared at this site between 2014–2018. It is hoped that many will return to breed and set up a second colony at around 5–7 years of age.

Numerous endemic Chatham Pigeons were in the fields on the way back to the Awatotara Private Reserve. Chatham Island Gerygones were quite common along with New Zealand fantails along the muddy forest trails in the Awatotara Private Reserve. Many species of tree fern and several species of orchid were also seen.

We looked hard for both Magenta and Chatham Petrels as we sailed west away from the Chathams, but with no luck.



### **17th and 18th December: At Sea**

There was good pelagic birding over the 2 days at sea heading SW back towards Bluff. We passed along and south of the Chatham Rise. All the previously noted seabirds were seen with the addition of a single Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross seen by 2 of us on 17th. This is apparently a lone individual that has been in residence on the Chathams for the last 15 years! Westland Petrels were seen in larger numbers than White-chinned on 18th and Grey-faced Petrels were the commonest petrel on both days. Large numbers of Cook's Petrels and Salvin's and Buller's Albatrosses were more common than White-capped or Campbell albatrosses although both were seen on many occasions. Northern Royal Albatrosses were more common than Southern on 17th, but by the 18th Southern were again the dominant Royal species.



**Plate 150.** Cook's Petrel.

### **19th December**

Docked back at Bluff Harbour at around 5.30 disembarked and driven back to the Langland's Hotel. Phil and I birded the excellent lagoon near the Invercargill Hospital about 3km south of the town.

All in all, this was an amazing trip. 14 species of Albatross, 24 other tubenoses, 9 species of Penguin, 8 species of shags and some of the most range restricted shorebirds. If penguins and albatrosses are high on your wish list, then this trip is an absolute must.

5 days of South Island birding and a couple of days of North Island birding completed my trip and these NZ land birds will be covered in a future article.

*Dr Nigel Hacking*  
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## Appendix 1.

### List of species mentioned in the text

#### Penguins (*Sphenisciformes*)

King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*  
 Yellow-eyed Penguin *Megadyptes antipodes*  
 Erect Crested Penguin *Eudyptes sclateri*  
 Snares Crested Penguin *Eudyptes robustus*  
 Royal Penguin *Eudyptes schlegeli*  
 Eastern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes filholi*  
 Little Blue Penguin *Eudyptula minor*  
 Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua*

#### Albatrosses (*Procellariiformes: Diomedidae*)

Southern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*  
 Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*  
 Snowy (Wandering) Albatross *Diomedea exulans*  
 Gibson's (Wandering) Albatross *Diomedea gibsoni*  
 Antipodean Albatross *Diomedea antipodensis*  
 Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche carteri*  
 Chatham Albatross *Thalassarche eremita*  
 Buller's Albatross *Thalassarche bulleri*  
 Salvin's Albatross *Thalassarche salvini*  
 Campbell Albatross *Thalassarche impavida*  
 Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma*  
 Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*  
 White-capped Albatross *Thalassarche cauta steadi*  
 Light-mantled Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*

#### Petrels and shearwaters

##### (*Procellariiformes: Procellariidae*)

Northern Giant Petrel *Macronectes halli*  
 Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*  
 White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*  
 Westland Petrel *Procellaria westlandica*  
 Magenta Petrel (Taiko) *Pterodroma magentae*  
 Chatham Islands Petrel *Pterodroma axillaris*  
 Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata*  
 Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis*  
 Cook's Petrel *Pterodroma cookii*  
 Grey-faced Petrel *Pterodroma gouldi*  
 White-headed Petrel *Pterodroma lessonii*  
 Cape Petrel *Daption capense*  
 Buller's Shearwater *Ardenna bulleri*  
 Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*  
 Sub-Antarctic Shearwater *Puffinus elegans*  
 Common Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix*

#### Storm-petrels (*Procellariiformes: Hydrobatidae*)

Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*  
 White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina*  
 Grey-backed Storm-petrel *Garrodia nereis*  
 Black-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregatta tropica*

#### Prions (*Procellariiformes: Procellariidae*)

Fairy Prion *Pachyptila turtur*  
 Broad-billed Prion *Pachyptila vittata*  
 Fulmar Prion *Pachyptila crassirostris*  
 Antarctic Prion *Pachyptila desolata*

#### Cormorants and shags

##### (*Pelecaniformes: Phalacrocoracidae*)

Campbell Shag *Leucocarbo campbelli*  
 Macquarie Shag *Leucocarbo purpurascens*  
 Auckland Shag *Leucocarbo colensoi*  
 Bounty Shag *Leucocarbo ranfurlyi*  
 Pitt Shag *Phalacrocorax featherstoni*

#### Terns (*Charadriiformes: Sternidae*)

White-fronted Tern *Sterna striata*  
 Antarctic Tern *Sterna vittata*

#### Skua (*Charadriiformes: Stercorariidae*)

Brown Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*

#### Other species

New Zealand Falcon *Falco novaeseelandiae*  
 Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans*  
 Shore Plover *Thinornis novaeseelandiae*  
 Chatham Island Oystercatcher *Haematopus chathamensis*  
 Red-crowned Parakeet *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*  
 Antipodes Islands Parakeet *Cyanoramphus unicolor*  
 Reischek's Parakeet *Cyanoramphus hochstetteri*  
 Sub-Antarctic Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica*  
 Campbell Island Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica perseverance*  
 Tui *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*  
 Bellbird *Anthornis melanura*  
 Chatham Islands Robin *Petroica traversi*  
 Chatham Islands Gerygone *Gerygone albofrontata*  
 Tomtit (Snares subspecies) *Petroica macrocephala dannefaerdi*  
 Tomtit (Auckland subspecies) *Petroica macrocephala marrineri*  
 New Zealand Pipit (Auckland subspecies) *Anthus novaeseelandiae aucklandicus*  
 Antipodean Pipit (steindachneri subspecies) *Anthus novaeseelandiae steindachneri*  
 Chatham Islands Pigeon *Hemiphaga chathamensis*  
 New Zealand fernbird *Poodytes punctatus*  
 Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*  
 Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea*  
 Auckland Teal *Anas aucklandica*  
 Campbell Teal *Anas nesiotis*

# Antarctica 2023/2024

by Lt Cdr Philip Boak, RN

*(All plates by the author unless otherwise stated)*

## Introduction

Over the Austral summer of 2023/2024, the author was fortunate to spend seven weeks on the Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough, followed by seven weeks onboard the Royal Navy's Ice Patrol Ship HMS *Protector*. Whilst the core aim was to gain experience operating in the polar region prior to joining HMS *Protector* as First Lieutenant from August 2024, the period gave an invaluable opportunity to experience and learn about the unique wildlife and heritage of the Antarctic and adjoining regions.

## The ships

Whilst both RRS Sir David Attenborough and HMS *Protector* are outwardly similar in their distinct red and white livery, and both rated to Polar Class 5<sup>1</sup>, there are several noticeable differences between the ships.

## RRS Sir David Attenborough (SDA)<sup>2</sup>

The SDA is one of the worlds most advanced polar research vessels, brought into service Autumn 2021, with an expected 35-year lifespan. The ship is 128m long, 15,000 gross tons, and operated by a crew of approximately 30, with up to 60 embarked scientists. The SDA was commissioned by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and operated by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS). The ship is designed to support scientific operations in an extreme environment, with a wide range of specialist scientific facilities, instruments and laboratories. The SDA also plays an important diplomatic role for the UK, providing a continuing presence in British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and the South Atlantic.

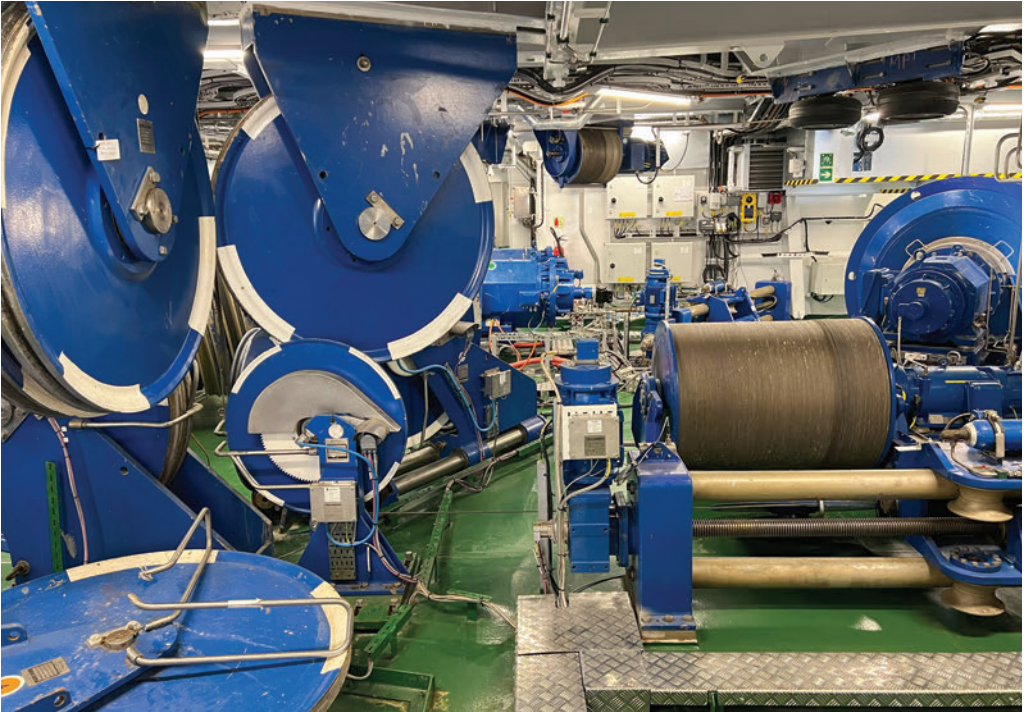


Plate 151. The SDA alongside Rothera Research Station (67°34'8"S) 25 November 2023.

<sup>1</sup> Year-round operation in medium first-year ice which may include old ice inclusions.

<sup>2</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/rrs-sir-david-attenborough/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/rrs-sir-david-attenborough/)





**Plate 152.** The winch-room onboard SDA. The SDA has an enhanced science winching capability to reliably deploy and retrieve scientific equipment including marine robotics and oceanographic equipment. There are nine scientific winches on board the ship, with a combined 61,000m of cable.

### **HMS Protector**

HMS *Protector* was built in Norway in 2001 and launched as MV *Polarbjorn* (Polar Bear). She was chartered by the Royal Navy as an interim replacement for HMS *Endurance* and commissioned into the Naval Service on 23 June 2011, before being purchased by the MOD in September 2013 as the permanent Ice Patrol Ship. The ship is 90m long, 6,700 gross tons, and operated by a crew of 90, divided into three ‘watches’ of 30 personnel each. Due to the three-watch system, some two thirds of the ships company are routinely onboard at any given time. The mission of HMS *Protector* remains ‘to patrol and survey the Antarctic and South Atlantic, maintaining UK Sovereign presence with wider regional engagement, supporting the global community of Antarctica’. HMS *Protector* carries onboard a variety of specialist equipment to enable her to carry out her role as the Ice Patrol Ship, including the Ice Variant Survey Motor Boat ‘James Caird’, which enables the gathering of bathymetric data close to shore. Carrying out a wide range of tasking over the 2023/2024 season, HMS *Protector* directly supported the BAS, United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT) and Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI).



**Plate 153.** HMS *Protector* off Dundee Island (63°30'S) February 2024. Note the Adélie penguins in the foreground.

## The locations and wildlife

The following provides a brief precis of some of the locations visited by SDA and HMS *Protector* over the 2023/2024 season. The locations have been ordered roughly from north to south.

### Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands are located on the South Atlantic at a latitude of 52°S, roughly the same latitude south as the UK is north. The Islands provide a vital staging post for vessels proceeding to the Antarctic, in particular due to their communication links and port facilities. Both the SDA and HMS *Protector* departed to-and-from the Falklands during their respective operations down south. The wildlife on the Falkland Islands have been well covered by previous articles in *Sea Swallow*. However, one of the highlights this time was being able to swim with Commerson's dolphins off Bertha's Beach.



**Plate 154.** Commerson's dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) off Bertha's Beach, East Falkland, encountered by the ships company of HMS *Protector* February 2024.

### South Georgia - King Edward Point (KEP)<sup>3</sup>

KEP Research Station is located on the island of South Georgia, at a latitude of 54°16'59"S. The station has been occupied since 1909, now supporting some 44 staff during the summer and 12 during the winter. KEP is primarily a marine and fisheries research station, owned by the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) and operated by the BAS. Surrounded by mountains and glaciers the subantarctic island of South Georgia is an important haven for wildlife. The area also has a rich heritage, with several abandoned whaling stations. These include Stromness, famous for being the end location of Shackleton's epic journey from Elephant Island to seek help for the stranded crew of the *Endurance*. These factors have led to South Georgia being a popular destination for tourists, with in excess of 10,000 visiting each year onboard cruise ships and expedition vessels. Both the SDA and HMS *Protector* visited KEP over the 2023/2024 season.

<sup>3</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/king-edward-point/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/king-edward-point/)





**Plate 155.** The SDA alongside KEP 17 December 2023. King penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*) can be seen in the foreground. Strict guidelines are in place for visitors in order to protect the wildlife from unnecessary stress and harm.



**Plate 156.** The whaler's church at the former Grytviken whaling station. The pre-fabricated church was assembled 1913, and is now part of the Anglican Communion's Diocese of the Falkland Islands. KEP and the SDA can be seen in the distant background.

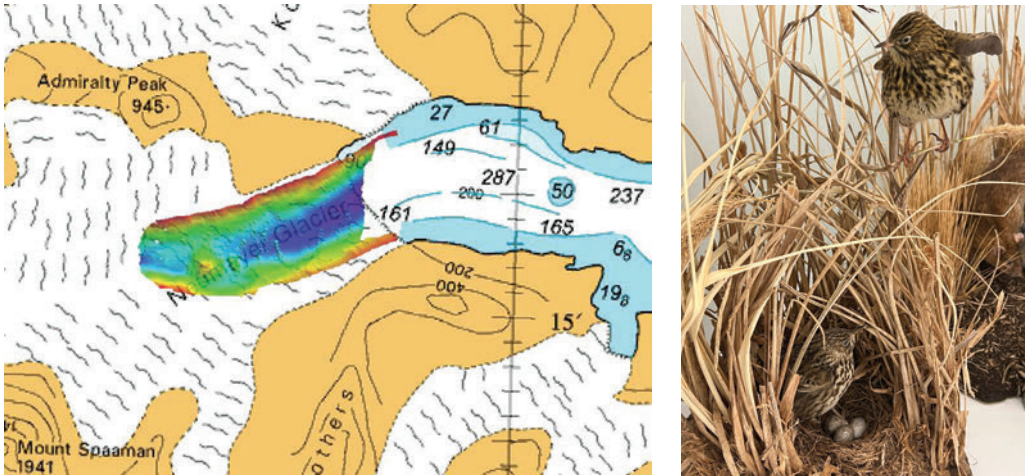




**Plate 157.** Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonine*) hauled out in front of former sealing vessels, abandoned at Grytviken. Elephant seals were hunted to the brink of extinction for oil by the end of the nineteenth century, but their numbers have since recovered.



**Plate 158.** HMS *Protector*'s SMB James Caird IV surveying off the Neumayer Glacier, South Georgia, February 2024. The SMB is named in honour of Shackleton's famous lifeboat, the James Caird, which made the epic 800-mile journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia in 1916.



**Figure 1. (left)** The modern-day survey operations conducted by the SMB revealed an alarming level of glacial retreat, with the SMB surveying in waters previously covered by the Neumayer Glacier some two decades previously, shown in the multicoloured multibeam echosounder trace above. © UKHO **Plate 159. (right)** South Georgia Pipit (*Anthus antarcticus*) in the South Georgia Museum. The pipit was threatened by the human introduction of rats, but has undergone a remarkable recovery following the success of the ambitious South Georgia de-ratting project. The RNBWS was delighted to award a small grant to help better assess the population of South Georgia Pipits. We look forward to a report in the 2025 edition of *Sea Swallow*.



**Plate 160.** The endemic South Georgia pintail. An omnivorous dabbling duck, the pintail is known to scavenge seal carcasses.



### South Georgia - Bird Island<sup>4</sup>

Bird Island Research Station is located to the west of South Georgia, at a latitude of 54°0'0"S. The station has been occupied intermittently from 1957–1982, and on a continual basis from 22 September 2022. The research station supports some ten personnel, including researchers specialising in seals, penguins and albatross.

Bird Island is considered one of the world's richest wildlife sites, home to 50,000 breeding pairs of penguins and 65,000 pairs of fur seals. Crucially the island is rat-free, supporting large numbers of small burrowing birds such as petrels and prions, as well as larger species including the wandering albatross. Over the austral summer, the beach in front of the station becomes a vital breeding ground for fur seals, with giant petrels, skuas and sheathbills actively patrolling to make short-work of dead and dying seal pups and exhausted males. The SDA carried out vital resupply work to the station December 2023.



Plate 161. Fuelling hose from the SDA's tender Terror supplying fuel to the research station 20 December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/bird-island/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/bird-island/)





**Plate 162.** Northern giant petrel (*Macronectes halli*) patrolling the beach on the hunt for dead or dying animals. Northern and Southern giant petrels are almost identical; the only difference is the colour of their beak tip. Northern giant petrels have a red tip, and Southern giant petrels have a green tip.



**Plate 163.** Snowy sheathbill (*Chionis albus*) feeding on a seal carcass, probably from a male fur seal. The males have a hard existence, on maturity returning to the beaches to defend their territory and harem of females from other males. Often, they die from complete exhaustion.





**Plate 164.** Female Antarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*) and pup. The specific scientific name is thought to have come from the German vessel SMS Gazelle, which was the first to collect specimens of this species from the Kerguelen Islands. However, they are also extremely fast moving, as experienced by the author when chased on numerous occasions!

### Signy<sup>4</sup>

Signy Research Station is located on Signy Island, of the South Orkney Islands, at a latitude of 60°43'0"S. The station has been occupied since 18 March 1947, but since 1996 this has been as a summer-only station.

The research at Signy focuses on bird populations and terrestrial ecology, with long-term studies conducted on several species including the Adélie, chinstrap and gentoo penguins, and the southern giant petrel. One in ten of the world's 50,000 southern giant petrels live around Signy, but there have been worrying population trends; in 2015 it was reported that the population had halved over the last 50 years. The terrestrial ecosystem is also of much interest, with Signy's soils and vegetation being colonised by large numbers of invertebrates, including mites, springtails, protozoa, nematodes and tardigrades. Both SDA and HMS *Protector* carried out resupply work to Signy over the 2023/2024 season.

<sup>4</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/signy/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/signy/)



**Plate 165.** Signy Research Station. The SDA can be seen in the background, with the tender Terror alongside the jetty carrying out vital resupply of the research station 2 December 2023.



**Plate 167.** Discarded harpoon heads at Signy. Whaling started in the South Orkney Islands in 1907–08. Petter Sørille, captain of the whale-catcher Paal, surveyed the island in 1912–13, naming Signy after his wife.



**Plate 166.** Gentoo penguins (*Pygoscelis papua*) at Signy.



**Plate 168.** Predatory mite on moss. With no indigenous terrestrial vertebrates on Signy, predatory mites occupy the top of the island's terrestrial food web.



**Plate 169.** Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonine*) are plentiful, forming large pods on suitable beaches during the summer.



## Deception Island<sup>6</sup>

Deception Island is an active volcano, at Latitude 62°59'S, famous for its horseshoe shape which allow ships to sail into the caldera. The 'safe' anchorage has been well utilised, with the Norwegian Aktieselskabet Hektor whaling station previously established at what is now called Whalers Bay. During Operation Tabarin<sup>7</sup>, the British established a base at Whalers Bay 3 February 1944, designated Station B. The Station utilised several of the former whaling station buildings, including a dormitory which became known as Biscoe House. The station was evacuated temporarily on 5 December 1967 after volcanic eruptions. It was evacuated again on 21 February 1969 when further eruptions damaged the station buildings. The station was finally abandoned on 23 February 1969.



**Plate 170.** The remains of Station B, Deception Island, February 2024. A cooker unit stands on the site of the former cookhouse, with the main accommodation building in the background.



**Plate 171.** Equipment from the Norwegian Aktieselskabet Hektor whaling station, Whalers Bay, Deception Island, February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/british-research-stations-and-refuges/deception-island-b/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/british-research-stations-and-refuges/deception-island-b/)

<sup>7</sup> The role of Operation Tabarin was ostensibly to deny safe anchorages to enemy raiding vessels and to gather meteorological data for allied shipping in the South Atlantic. Tabarin also actively reinforced British territorial claims in the Falkland Islands Dependencies at a time when this was being challenged. [www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/operation-tabarin/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/operation-tabarin/)

Due to its relatively easily accessible location and the somewhat unique opportunity to sail into an active volcano, Deception Island is a popular location for visiting expedition ships. HMS *Protector* visited the area February 2024 to report on the state of the former British Station, and provide a chance for the ships company to ‘step ashore’.

### Detaille Island<sup>8</sup>

Detaille Island is located to the west of the Antarctic peninsula at a latitude of 66° 52’S. The base, once designated Station W, was occupied from 21 February 1956–31 March 1959. The station at Detaille Island, along with its counterpart on Horseshoe Island, was at the centre of Britain’s contribution to the International Geophysical Year (1957–58). Detaille was evacuated in dramatic circumstances 31 March 1959 when sea ice and weather made relief by ship impossible, and the occupants had to sledge over 30 miles over the sea-ice to meet the waiting ship. Due to the sudden evacuation, the base provides something of a time-capsule and is now managed by the UKAHT under a Memorandum of Understanding with BAS. HMS *Protector* visited the site on two occasions over the 2024/2024 season in order to offload and onload supplies used in the maintenance of the historic site.



**Plate 172.** Work party from HMS *Protector* approaching Detaille Island February 2024.



**Plate 173.** The main building at Detaille Island, once designated Station W.



**Plate 174.** The interior of the main building at Detaille Island is preserved as a time capsule, following its hasty abandonment in 1959.



**Plate 175.** Weddell seals (*Leptonychotes weddellii*) hauled out on the ice surrounding Detaille Island.

<sup>8</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/british-research-stations-and-refuges/detaille-island-w/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/about/about-bas/history/british-research-stations-and-refuges/detaille-island-w/)



### Rothera<sup>9</sup>

Rothera Research Station is located on Adelaide Island, at a latitude of 67°34'8"S. The station has been occupied from 25 October 1975, and is a centre for biological research and a hub for supporting deep-field and air operations. The station operates throughout the year. In summer, the population peaks at just over 100 people, while during the winter months, from April to mid-October, a 22-strong team continues the science work and maintains Rothera's infrastructure. This includes a crushed rock runway, hangar and wharf for large vessels including the SDA and HMS *Protector*, which visited over the 2023/2024 season.



**Plate 176.** The hangar at Rothera, with De Havilland Canada Twin Otters (DHC-6) in background, and the tail of a De Havilland Canada Dash-7 (DHC-7) in the foreground.

<sup>9</sup> [www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/rothera/](http://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/rothera/)



**Plate 177.** Adélie penguin (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) at Rothera.



**Plate 178.** Antarctic tern (*Sterna vittata*) at Rothera.



## Weddell Sea

The Weddell is part of the Southern Ocean, located to the east of the Antarctic Peninsula, covering an area of approximately 2.8 million square kilometres. Over a ten-day period November/December 2023, the SDA conducted the ‘BIOPOLE Southern Ocean Cruise’, which was the first ‘formal’ scientific voyage of the ship<sup>10</sup>. The cruise sought to understand the role that annual sea ice retreat plays in setting the conditions for the spring bloom and how this bloom acts to draw down carbon from the atmosphere and sequester it in the deep ocean. The scientific operations included the regular deployment of nets (Plates 179 and 180) and the Conductivity Temperature Depth (CTD) carousel, as well as obtaining ice-cores from the sea ice. Various marine organisms were encountered as part of the study, including an abundance of bird-life.



**Plate 179.** ‘Mammoth net’ being deployed onboard the SDA 8 December 2023. The net is carefully lowered to a designated depth, before being slowly recovered. During the ascent, a pressure sensitive mechanism will open and close up to ten-separate nets at different depth ranges. This enables the unique biota of the Antarctica water column to be recorded as it changes with depth.

<sup>10</sup> <https://biopole.ac.uk/tag/rrs-sir-david-attenborough/>

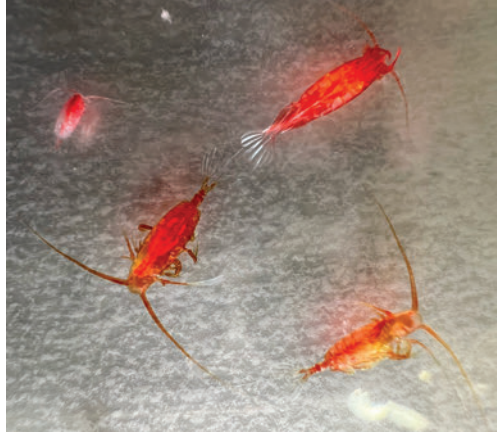


**Plate 180.** 'Bongo net' being deployed onboard the SDA 8 December 2023. This net is typically lowered to a depth of approximately 200m, before being slowly recovered, sampling the organisms of the Antarctic waters. Through repeat samples and careful extrapolation, an estimate may be made of the total biomass in the Antarctic waters.

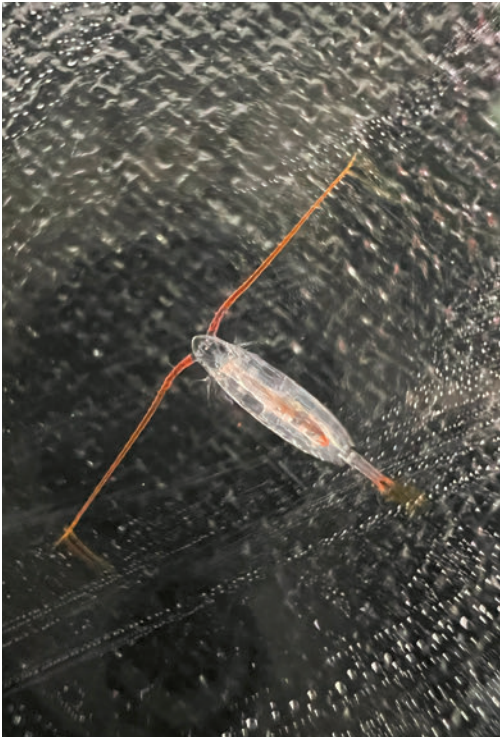




**Plate 181.** Marine amphipod of Antarctic waters trapped by the SDA 10 December 2023.



**Plate 183.** Marine copepods trapped by the SDA 10 December 2023. The emphasis on copepods was part of the core BIOPOLE objective of quantifying the lipid component of the biological carbon pump.



**Plate 182.** Copepod *Calonoides acutus*. This copepod was of particular importance to BIOPOLE. Over the course of their development, *C. acutus* develop a large carbon-rich lipid sac, primarily to fuel their metabolism and aid buoyancy during their winter diapause (a form of hibernation used to survive low food levels and avoid predation) at depths of (potentially) up to 2500 m. This deep diapause acts to transport carbon from the atmosphere to the deep ocean, but this transport had hitherto never been quantified despite the vast biomass that copepods represent.



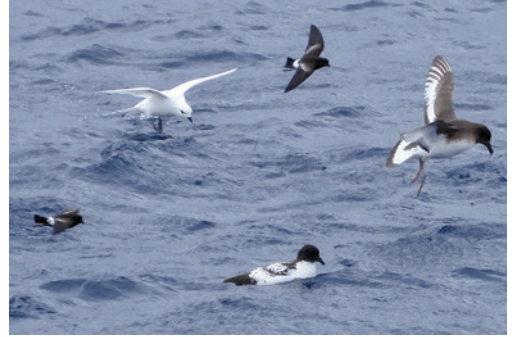
**Plate 184.** The copepod *Calanis propinquus*.



**Plate 185.** Antarctic krill (right) and mysid shrimp (left). The krill in particular forms a vital component of Antarctic food webs, providing a food source to seals, penguins, whales and other predators.



**Plate 186.** Emperor penguins (*Aptenodytes forsteri*) seen from onboard the SDA during the early hours of the morning 11 December 2023. Away from the main colonies, it is surmised the individuals and small groups were non-breeding males.



**Plate 187.** The variety and abundance of seabirds in the Weddell was extraordinary, with four species of petrel seen in this one photo. Clockwise from far-left; Wilson's Storm-petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*), Snow petrel (*Pagodroma nivea*), Wilson's Storm-petrel, Antarctic petrel (*Thalassoica antarctica*), Cape Petrel (*Daption capense*).



**Plate 188.** A pair of Wilson's storm-petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*). With a circumpolar distribution, the petrel is thought to be one of the most abundant bird species on earth.

## Conclusion

Each one of the locations or projects discussed above would warrant its own article, given the sheer diversity and abundance of wildlife and fascinating social history. However, it is hoped this article has given some indication of the tasking of the SDA and HMS *Protector*, as well as provide details of the key locations and wildlife encountered.

Joining HMS *Protector* as First Lieutenant, the author will hopefully enjoy a further two seasons down in the Antarctic, with further reports for *Sea Swallow* to follow.

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# Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* migration around Cyprus 2023–24 - an update on their numbers

by Colin Richardson

(All plates by the author)

I was kindly asked by the Editor to provide a migration update on large waterbirds, following my article *Seawatching at Chrysochou Bay, Cyprus during the autumns of 2020–22* published in *Sea Swallow* 72 (2023). This has been a particularly worrying issue following the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023, during the war in Ukraine. The ensuing flood into the Dnipro Delta (a Ramsar site<sup>1</sup>) on the Black Sea is believed to have caused the destruction of large numbers of waterbird colonies during their breeding season, including Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, many of which pass Cyprus during spring and autumn migrations.

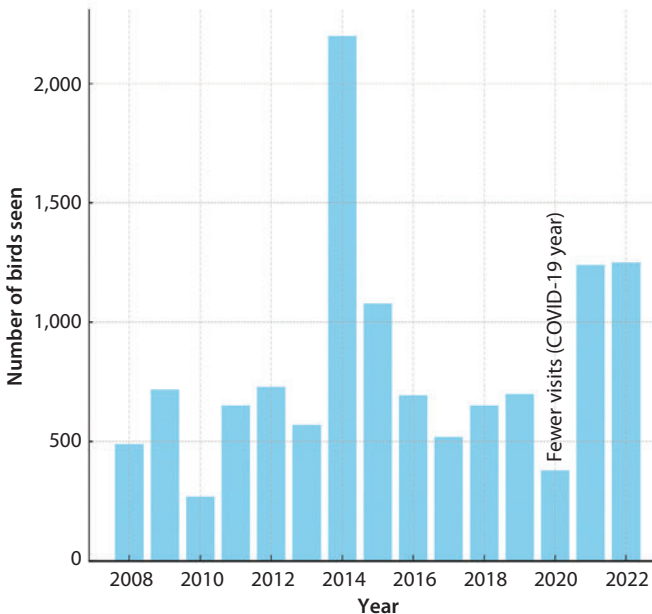


Figure 1. Birds seen 2008–2022.

Although my autumn seawatch activities are not scientific, they have been consistent. I choose an observation point facing north into Polis Chrysochou Bay where I remain for 5–7 hours per day for up to 14 days from late July–September and have done so annually from 2008–2023. The results are quite interesting. I present here a series of autumn counts of Glossy Ibis from 2008–22, before the dam burst, and compare them with recent observations in autumn 2023 and spring 2024, after the flooding of the wetlands.

Therefore over the 15-year period the average number of birds counted each autumn was 809.

## Latest Glossy Ibis counts

During the 2023 autumn period I counted 980 birds passing Polis Chrysochou Bay from late July to September. This is slightly less than the numbers in the autumns of 2021 and 2022, but it does exceed the autumn average of 809 birds.

<sup>1</sup> A Ramsar site is a wetland of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty established in 1971 in the city of Ramsar, Iran.



**Plate 189.** Groups of up to 250 Glossy Ibis passed Mandria on 9 April 2024.



**Plate 190.** Many drop to low level over the sea as they reach the coast at Mandria, 9 April 2024.



**Plate 191.** Others pass Mandria in formation heading north, 9 April 2024.





**Plate 192.** Some young or injured individuals get left behind on migration.

This appears to be a positive outcome. There was even better news the following spring of 2024, when there was an extraordinary passage of Glossy Ibis at Mandria, a migration ‘hotspot’ on the south coast, on 9 April 2024. The sky was overcast and heavy, with rain on the horizon. The wind was variable, and the eastern Mediterranean was in the middle of a swirling low pressure system. Starting at 11.30h, long waving formations of Glossy Ibis, mostly in groups of 160–200 birds appeared off the sea (see photos), many flying inland, others passing west along the coast, but in all totalling 1,010 birds in two and a half hours. This is the largest daily total I have ever seen in Cyprus. Other observers along the south coast had reported a further 2,000 birds, making a day total of over 3,000 birds. An exceptional figure and nearly four times the previous day number ever recorded in Cyprus for the species.

Although these extraordinary movements suggest that the disastrous manmade flooding of the Dnipro Delta, adjacent to Crimea on the northern Black Sea, may not have negatively affected the overall Glossy Ibis population, it is likely that the origins of the large numbers of Glossy Ibis passing Cyprus are from colonies in the nearby Dniester Delta and the huge Danube Delta further to the southwest, and elsewhere in Ukraine and in Russia, so masking the negative effect any damage caused to the Dniester Delta.

The inclement weather also stimulated this single day movement, and such a large number might also be explained by the species’ long-term population increase in the last 30 years in Ukraine and Russia, according to a 2021 Birdlife International report I am very pleased to have been given an opportunity to highlight this good-news story of population increase, at a time of declining bird populations across Europe and the western Palearctic.

## Reference

Flint P & Richardson C 2024. The Birds of Cyprus. British Ornithologists’ Club, UK. (Reviewed later in this volume of *Sea Swallow*)

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Plate 193. Blue-winged Teal.

## A hot spring day on the Texas coast

by Lt Jack Crowe, RN

*(All plates by the author)*

Early one spring morning, I found myself watching a Mottled Duck and some recently hatched ducklings dabbling away on a small pool on Galveston Island, Texas. A day earlier, in downtown Houston, birding the Gulf Coast had seemed an excellent idea but after an early start as the sun began to take hold at Lafitte's Cove Nature Reserve, the reality was looking a little different. It was already blisteringly hot and our local guide seemed resigned to a slow day. Good birding days on the Gulf Coast are typically associated with bad weather, particularly fast-moving cold fronts, which can cause migrating birds to 'fall-out' or head for the first available land to rest, in large numbers following a gruelling crossing of the Gulf of Mexico. The phenomenon, makes this section of coast is one of the best places in the Americas to find migrating warblers. The flat calm, windless and scorchingly hot day we found ourselves faced with was almost precisely the opposite.

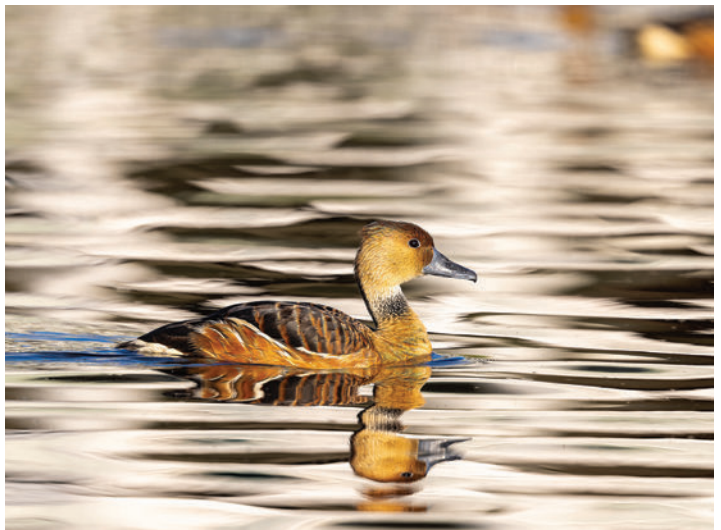


Plate 194. Fulvous Whistling Duck.



A minor setback we thought, insisting on heading into the woods in search of songbirds in any case (there were rumours of a Swainson's Warbler so how could we not). Our guide's strong warnings that the lack of wind would make the mosquitos particularly unpleasant went unheeded. We should have listened to him. Soon the soundscape was full of their incessant whine, the insects thronged around us, seemingly impervious to repellent and it was clear that we had made a mistake. We were hardly rewarded for our efforts either, a female Hooded Warbler and a Black-and-White Warbler were all we had to show for an hour-long search. Despondent, we retreated from the trees to the relatively mosquito free safety of the pools from which we had started. Here things started to look up. The pools had filled with a collection of ducks, which included Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling Ducks, and Blue-winged Teal. Overhead flew Swainson's Hawk and Northern Harrier, while a White-faced Ibis surveyed us with interest as we counted the damage inflicted by the mosquitos. With no one in the group having fewer than ten bites, we resolved to give up on warblers for the day and go and explore the plethora of shore habitats Galveston has to offer, starting with Galveston Island State Park.

Managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the park protects 2,000 acres of sand dune, salt marsh, coastal prairie and wetland. As the last truly undeveloped land on the whole barrier island, it has established itself as a vital refuge for Galveston's resident wildlife and the large numbers of migrants that use Galveston Island as a first port of call when arriving from Central and Southern America. On arrival, I spotted a Crested Caracara perched in a tree on the far bank of a large pool and rushed down to the shore edge to try for a better look. In my haste and



Figure 1. Galveston map. © Jack Crowe



**Plate 195.** Greater Yellowlegs.



**Plate 196.** Wilson's Plover.



**Plate 197.** Piping Plover.



**Plate 198.** Forsters Tern.



**Plate 199.** Least Tern.



**Plate 200.** American Avocet.

concentrating on the far bank, I disturbed a nearby by Willet which took to the air shrieking in indignation (they are minded to do this even when you are not right on top of them and this would not be my last upset Willet of the day). It was here that I got my first look at a Black Skimmer, a bird I had been desperate to see. Settled on a sand bar, their goofy form was unmistakable. Approaching each other with a slight waddle they look uncomfortable, the extended lower mandible awkward and inconvenient, but as they take flight they transform. This pair gracefully skimmed the water like a pair of fighter jets, soon catching fish and swiftly returning to their sand bar. Magnificent. The other notable bird present in the park in numbers is the Forster's Tern, the Gulf Coast of Texas being one of one of the few places these terns reside year-round.





Plate 201. Horned Lark.



Plate 202. Red-winged Blackbird.



Plate 203. Reddish Egret.



Plate 204. Brown Pelican.



Plate 205. American Herring Gull.



Plate 206. American White Pelican and American Avocet.

With the morning having improved considerably from our shaky start, we went in search of lunch and headed for the Fisherman's Wharf area of the city where we found an excellent seafood restaurant. Here we ordered Po'boy sandwiches, a delicacy from just across the border in Louisiana, brimming with gulf shrimp and delicious Cajun spices. From the restaurant we had an unrivalled view of the USS *Texas* (A New York Class Battleship); she is undergoing a \$60 million dollar restoration after which she will be reopened to the public. For those interested in naval history Galveston also houses the submarine USS *Cavalla* and the destroyer USS *Stewart* in the Galveston Naval Museum. These naval vessels are all located on the aptly named Pelican Island and it will come as no shock to anyone familiar with the US Gulf Coast that the sky was full of squadrons of Brown Pelicans flying synchronously as well as the odd American White Pelican, massive but somehow awkward in a way their brown cousins are not.



**Plate 207.** Black Tern.

A brief discussion followed lunch and we resolved to leave Galveston Island and head for the Southern tip of the Bolivar Peninsular to look for waders. This is achieved using the Bolivar Ferry, which is excellent once you are onboard, however we had to queue to board for over an hour. From the ferry we were joined by Laughing, American Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, as well as a large group of American Avocets. Undoubtedly the highlights, however, were a brown booby swooping past the ferry (not especially common close inshore in Texas) and a large group of more than 100 Black Skimmers huddling together on the beach at the northern ferry terminal.

Our destination was the Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary. The preserve is owned by the Houston Audubon Society (of High Island Fame) and is listed as a Globally Important Bird Area. The flats were created when, in the 1880s, a jetty was built to protect the mouth of Galveston Bay. The impact of this human development was to alter sediment accumulation rates and the Flats, now an internationally important site for ground-nesting birds, particularly Least Tern, were born.

On approach we spied a magnificent group of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers sitting on the wire fences to the side of the road and a dinosaur-like Red-winged Blackbird chattered as we left the vehicle to inspect the marsh. From here we could see our first significant numbers of wading birds, with both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, as well as a Wilson's Phalarope present. The Bolivar Flats Beach itself turned out to be the star location of the day. There were shore birds galore. Our senses were barraged by different bird species everywhere we looked. Large aggregations of sanderling were running up and down the tideline disguising Baird's, Western, Pectoral and Least Sandpipers as well as Piping, Semipalmated, American Golden, Grey, Snowy and Wilson's Plovers. A bonanza of small waders. The skies were filled with multitudes of terns (Royal, Common, Sandwich, Forster's, Least, Black and Gull-billed) while the dunes hid Horned Larks and Savannah and Vespa Sparrows. As we arrived at the flats' southernmost tip, we were staggered by the sheer volume of American Avocet and American White Pelicans found there. Both were wintering on the Gulf Coast in vast numbers and preparing to head to their summer breeding-grounds to the north, we found them to be a riotous assault on the senses, a great colourful noisy mass that without warning would lift as one and whirl and dance with birds of all sizes seemingly sucked into the maelstrom.

On our return leg we were treated to one last spectacle, a reddish egret on the hunt. If you've not seen one before there really is nothing quite like it. Unlike most ardeids, who patiently wait in a location to ambush their prey, this species actively stalks,



energetically sprinting across the water's surface while using its outspread wings as shades to reduce the glare of the water making it easier to deliver the killing blow. Watching this enthusiastic egret dance through the flats, twirling and dashing and striking was almost hypnotic and a truly spectacular way to finish the day.

Despite the slow start, we finished our day having seen 93 species of bird. With so many more birds to see in North America and so much more habitat to explore, I look forward to returning in the future. Hopefully the weather might not be quite as good next time, and the songbirds might come out to play.

**Lt Jack Crowe, RN**

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## Appendix 1.

### List of species mentioned in the text

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*  
Fulvous Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*  
Mottled Duck *Anas fulvigula*  
Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis*  
Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*  
Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors*  
Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*  
Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*  
Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*  
Double-crested Cormorant *Nannopterum auritum*  
Neotropic Cormorant *Nannopterum brasilianum*  
American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*  
Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*  
Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*  
Great White Egret *Ardea alba*  
Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*  
Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*  
Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*  
Tricoloured Heron *Egretta tricolor*  
Western Cattle Egret *Butorides ibis*  
White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*  
White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi*  
Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*  
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*  
Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*  
Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*  
Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus*  
American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*  
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*  
Snowy Plover *Charadrius nivosus*  
Wilson's Plover *Charadrius wilsonia*  
Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus*  
Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*  
Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*  
Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*  
American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*  
Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*  
Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*  
Willet *Tringa semipalmata*  
Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*  
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*  
Sanderling *Calidris alba*  
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*  
Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*  
Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*  
Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*  
Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*  
Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*  
Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*  
Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*  
Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*  
Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*  
Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*  
Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*  
Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*  
Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*  
Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*  
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*  
Least Tern *Sternula antillarum*  
Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*  
Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandwicensis*  
Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*  
Rock Dove *Columba livia*  
White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*  
Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*  
Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens*  
Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*  
Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*  
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus forficatus*  
Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Corthylio calendula*  
Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*  
Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*  
Northern Parula *Setophaga americana*  
Hooded Warbler *Setophaga citrina*  
Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata*  
Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*  
Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*  
Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorum*  
Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*  
Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*  
Vesper Sparrow *Pooecetes gramineus*  
Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*  
Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*  
Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*  
Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*  
Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*  
Purple Martin *Progne subis*  
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

# New Guinea and Tropical Australia - The Coral, Solomon, Halmahera & Arafura Seas

by Simon Cook

*(All plates by the author)*

Between 2015 and 2019 I spent several months on three small ships (*MV Caledonian Sky*, *MV Island Sky* and *MV Silver Discoverer*) with two different companies (Noble Caledonia and Silversea Cruises) in the waters off northern Australia - see Appendix 1 for a complete list of voyages. The focus was the highly popular Kimberley coast, in the northern part of the state of Western Australia (WA). For reporting purposes, the data and other observations can be broken down into three parts - the voyages to the north and south of New Guinea, the crossings of the Timor and Arafura Seas between Australia and Indonesia and the trips back and forth along the Kimberley coast. The last two will be covered in separate articles.

In 2018 I was on board *MV Silver Discoverer* for the pre-Kimberley cruise from Cairns, Queensland, along the entire north coast of New Guinea from east to west, then south through the Den Weg and Kai Islands and onwards to Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia. Then, in 2019, the first cruise of the Kimberley season from Darwin to Broome on another ship was cancelled. Due to a mechanical problem the vessel was still much further east, in Cairns, Queensland so some colleagues and I were flown from Darwin to join it. After a few days in port, we sailed non-stop to Broome, WA, going around the tip of the Cape York peninsula, to the south of New Guinea and finishing near Cable Beach, Broome.



Figure 1. New Guinea map. © Google Earth

In addition to the usual heady mix of landings, lectures and lunches, there was plenty of sea time to spend on the lookout for wildlife. Many hours-worth of seabird watches were submitted to the society. Observations on sea days lasted for several hours and, typically, were divided between two or three survey periods. Never having sailed in these waters before, I was unsure about what to expect. The highlight turned out to be the combination of both cold and warm-water tubenoses. Many hours of scanning resulted in a total of 19 species of seabird being observed but all were in relatively low numbers. All times quoted are local and the latitude and longitude are given for the most interesting sightings.

**Tahiti Petrel** *Pseudobulweria rostrata*.

28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, Papua New Guinea (PNG): 5 between 08.00 & 11.00 at c. 02° 45' S, 141° 45' E, 30/6/18 at sea, West Papua (WP): 1 at 09.42 at 01° 08' S, 136° 47' E.

**Heinroth's Shearwater** *Puffinus heinrothi*.

28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 1 at 09.30 at 02° 45' S, 141° 45' E, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island (WP), 06.30–07.30 watch: possible Heinroth's Shearwater at c. 00° 21' S, 133° 08' E.

**Wedge-tailed Shearwater** *Ardenna pacifica*.

24/6/18 Coral Sea to Alotau, PNG (land in sight): 1, 4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (NT): 1 between 07.30–10.00 at c. 10° 46' S, 136° 26' E (not normally expected west of the Cape York Peninsula), 7/6/19 Kimberley coast: 1 pale phase at 15° 04' S, 123° 22' E.

**Streaked Shearwater** *Calonectris leucomelas*.

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 6 & 1, 6/6/19 off Cape Londonderry, WA: 1 at c. 12° 40' S, 126° 49' E.

**Wilson's Storm-petrel** *Oceanites oceanicus*.

4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 1 at 16.51 at 10° 59' S, 127° 20' E, 65 nm offshore, wind SE 29 knots, 6/6/19 off Cape Londonderry, WA: 1 at 13° 12' S, 129° 59' E, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast: 2–1 at 10.35 at 15° 10' S, 123° 13' E and 1 at 11.30 at 15° 14' S, 123° 05' E.

**Black-bellied Storm-petrel** *Fregetta tropica*.

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 1, 06.30–07.30 watch at c. 14° 16' S, 147° 33' E, 1, 08.15–10.15 watch at c. 14° 02' S, 147° 49' E, 1, 13.30–16.30 watch at c. 13° 32' S, 148° 30' E.

**Red-footed Booby** *Sula sula*.

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 2 for 20 minutes at 14° 16' S, 147° 33' E, then 1 08.15–10.15 watch at 14° 02' S, 147° 49' E, 26/6/18 Tuam Island to Sepik River, PNG: 1, 29/6/18 at sea, Jayapura, West Papua to Puidaidori, Geelvink Islands, WP: 3 on board after dark.

**Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra*.

27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River: 1 on flotsam at 04° 09' S, 144° 58' E, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast 3, 1.

**Indo-Pacific Brown Booby** *Sula plotus*.

24/6/18 Coral Sea to Alotau, PNG (land in sight): 1, 26/6/18 Tuam Island to Sepik River: 1, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River: 2 & 9, 28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 50–60,



30/6/18 at sea, West Papua: 3, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island, 06.30–12.00 watch: 5, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 1, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea: Cairns to Broome - off Cape York Peninsula: 10 & 26, 3/6/19 Gulf of Carpentaria: 12 (and frigatebird sp. 2 & Crested Tern 1, all within sight of Booby Island, shortly after daybreak), 5 & 1 later in the day, 4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 2, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast: 24, 30 feeding & 12, 8/6/19 approaching Broome, 06.00–07.00: 1.

**Lesser Frigatebird** *Fregata ariel*.

27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: 1 & 1, 28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 4, 30/6/18 at sea, West Papua: 2, 2/7/18 at sea, Cenderawasih Bay to Amsterdam Island: 31, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island: 1 & 28, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 29, 3 & 4, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 2, 3/6/19 Gulf of Carpentaria: 1, 5/6/19 off Melville and Bathurst islands, NT: 1, 4, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast: 6 & 1.

**Frigatebird sp.**

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 1, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island: 13, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: c. 80.



Plate 208. Common Noddies.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo*.

4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 4, non-breeding plumage, 5/6/19 off Melville and Bathurst islands, NT: 1.

**Roseate Tern** *Sterna dougalii*.

4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 4 at c. 01° 34' S, 130° 36' E, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 5.

**Black-naped Tern** *Sterna sumatrana*.

4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 1.

**Eastern Bridled Tern** *Onychoprion anaethetus*.

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 1, 24/6/18 Coral Sea to Alotau, PNG (land in sight): 40–50, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: 1, 28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 2–300.

**Sooty Tern** *Onychoprion fuscatus*.

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: c. 100 & 27, 30/6/18 at sea to Geelvink Islands, West Papua: 3, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island: 19, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 1, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: c. 40, 4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 2, 9, 41 & 2, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast: 1.

**Sooty/Bridled tern.**

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern New Guinea: 23, 6, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: 180, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 1.

**Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bergii*.

25/6/18 en route from Cape Nelson to Tuam Island, PNG: 4, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: 1, 29/6/18 at sea, Jayapura, West Papua to Puidaidori, Geelvink Islands: 1, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island: 1, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 5, 8 & 8, 5/7/18 Den Weg Islands to Triton Bay: 5, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 3 & 12, 4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 2 & 16, 5/6/19 off Melville and Bathurst islands, NT: 15 & 28, 6/6/19 off Cape Londonderry, WA: 2 & 6, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast 9 & 4, 8/6/19 approaching Broome, 06.00–07.00 watch: 19.

**Common Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus*.

2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 3, 7/6/19 Kimberley coast to Broome: 3, c. 200 & c. 50.

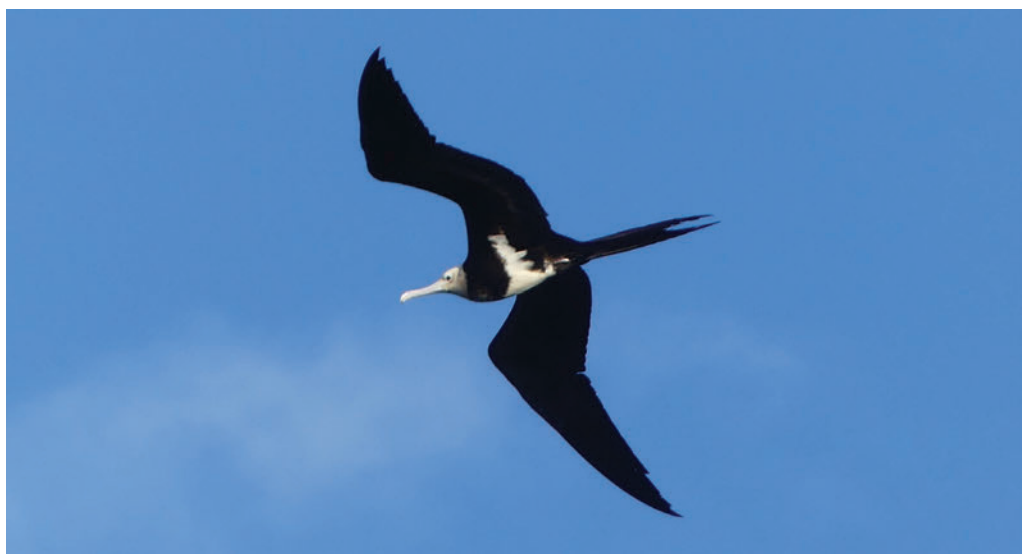


Plate 209. Lesser Frigatebird.

**Pacific Black Noddy** *Anous minutus*.

24/6/18 Coral Sea to Alotau, PNG (land in sight): 120 & 150, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: c. 20, 28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 83, 29/6/18 at sea, Jayapura, West Papua to Puidaidori, Geelvink Islands: 1, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 3, 2/6/2019 south of New Guinea - Cairns to Broome non-stop, off Cape York Peninsula: 9, 3–4,000 & 27, 4/6/19 off Arnhem Land, NT: 1 & 3.

**Noddy sp.**

24/6/18 Coral Sea to Alotau, PNG (land in sight): 4–500, 25/6/18 en route from Cape Nelson to Tuam Island, PNG: c. 50.

**Indo-Pacific White Noddy** *Gygis candida*.

28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: 3.

**Tern sp.**

23/6/18 Coral Sea, Cairns to eastern Papua New Guinea: 7, 27/6/18 at sea to Sepik River, PNG: 2, 28/6/18 at sea to Vanimo, PNG: c. 3,000 in feeding groups at 02° 45' S, 141° 45' E, 29/6/18 at sea, Jayapura, West Papua to Puidaidori, Geelvink Islands: 9, 30/6/18 at sea, West Papua: 1, 3/7/18 to Amsterdam Island: 29, 4/7/18 Halmahera Sea, off West Papua to Den Weg Islands: 4 & 'commic'-type tern 46.



Plate 210. Crested Tern.



Plate 211. Black-naped Terns.

**Other wildlife (see Appendix 2 for additional scientific names)**

Marine mammals to the north and south of New Guinea were few and far between, with just the odd sightings of dolphins, for example. On the 6th June 2018 off Cape Londonderry (WA) en route to Broome there were two turtles - 1 Green Turtle that was covered in 20–30 big white barnacles and my first-ever Flatback Turtle, the only sea turtle species restricted to Australian waters. In addition to a MacDowell's Sea Snake, other sea creatures of note included sharks. The first was a very close, 2 metre-long Great Hammerhead Shark off Melville and Bathurst islands, NT, which dived. The best encounter though was in Cenderawasih Bay, West Papua. We were out in the Zodiacs, searching for something much, much bigger. Finally, at a huge, floating, fishing platform, there it was - a Whale Shark feeding on fish processing waste. The snorkellers remained unmolested!!

Turning now to the avifauna and, on the 27th June 2018, several land birds were seen from the ship (04° 22' S, 145° 26' E), en route to the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea: 1 Eastern Reef Egret around the ship at 06.45, 5½ nm offshore, 1 (huge!) Channel-billed Cuckoo going east at 07.15, 3 Pacific Swallows at 07.24 and 1 Greater Sand Plover shortly afterwards. Two Zodiac cruises were particularly rewarding. On the 5th July at the Den Weg Islands I noted 1 Great-billed Heron, 1 Ivory-billed Coucal, 1 New Guinea Friarbird, 2 Brown Orioles and one member of the bird of paradise family - Crinkle-collared Manucode. At Aiduma Island the next day exciting birds included 1 Long-tailed Honey Buzzard, 7 Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and c. 30 massive Papuan Hornbills. They were mostly males and were seen in flight and perched.





**Plate 212.** Eastern Reef Egret.



**Plate 213.** Papuan Hornbill.

Once ashore and out of the boats, there were highlights on three different days. On the 30th June on a rainy Puidori Island, Geelvink, Islands, West Papua, I saw Biak Fantail, Geelvink Imperial Pigeon, Biak Long-tailed Starling, Claret-breasted Fruit Dove, Black-capped Lory, Biak Myzomela and Biak Scrubfowl. Our visit to Amsterdam Island (00° 21' S, 132° 10' E) on the 3rd July was notable for being the first visit by a cruise ship. Consequently, lavish entertainment had been laid on for us but during a very short, snatched walk I heard several Eastern Hooded Pittas and saw a White-crowned Cuckoo. Four days later and we were ashore at the Kai Islands where 1 White-bibbed Fruit Dove, 1 Salvadori's Flowerpecker, 2 Kai Fantails and 1 Kai Kecil White-eye were seen. Lastly, for 2018, comes a bird that I didn't even see, apart from in a photograph. On the 8th July in the Arafura Sea my colleague the spa girl saw a Rose-crowned Fruit Dove on deck between 02.00 & 03.00!

Not so much was seen on the non-stop voyage from Cairns to Broome in 2019 but, before flying from Darwin, a Rainbow Pitta was seen in a colleague's garden. A few days in Cairns gave plenty of opportunities for walking around and the highlights were 2 Welcome Swallows onboard, Bush Stone-curlew seen from the ship, a pair of very close Papuan Frogmouths in the botanical gardens and, on the 1st June, as the ship left the dock for the sea, an Australian Hobby. It flew past the ship and began circling, hawking and feeding over the water.



**Plate 214.** Bush Stone-curlew.



**Plate 215.** Welcome Swallow.



**Plate 216.** Rainbow Pitta.



**Plate 217.** Papuan Frogmouth.

Three species of land bird were seen the next day. A Tree Sparrow was aboard at 08.58 at 14° 03' S, 144° 25' E, 8.3 nm off the Cape York Peninsula. It came in from ahead of us - presumably off *Goldeneye*, a big cargo ship 4.8 nm in front of us and heading in the same direction as us. Then there came a very big surprise - we were joined by 4 Rainbow Bee-eaters from 09.56–11.06 at 13° 56' S, 144° 18' E, c. 18 nm offshore. The first was exciting enough but then came number 2, then number 3 and then number 4! They were flying around and also spent time on the ship - there was lots of calling and two were seen to catch and eat moths that were on the upper deck. Lastly, on the 5th June, there was a very close Little Friarbird. It quite possibly came off the ship and it flew off to the south at 09.17 at 10° 52' S, 131° 24' E, 24 nm north of the eastern end of Melville Island, NT.



**Plate 218.** Rainbow Bee-eater aboard.

These voyages to the north and south of New Guinea (one planned, the other not) took me to areas not very often seen from cruise ships. Consequently, there was always something to look out for. Short visits to communities along the north coast of New Guinea produced few birds but bird-orientated (for me at least!) Zodiac cruises were full of expectation and excitement. In terms of unusual encounters from a ship or boat, the highlight had to be the sighting of the wonderfully named Crinkle-collared Manucode. It reminded me of the time that I saw an Amazonian Umbrellabird from an expedition cruise ship but that's another story!

**Simon Cook**

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## Appendix 1. List of voyages: Timor Sea, Arafura Sea, Coral Sea, Halmahera Sea

### 2015

- 6–16th June: Kupang, Timor, Indonesia - Wyndham - Broome.  
 16th July–5th August: Kupang - Wyndham - Broome - Wyndham - Kupang.

### 2017

- 10th July–29th August: Darwin - Broome - Darwin - Broome - Darwin - Broome.

### 2018

- 22nd June–9th July: Cairns - easternmost New Guinea - entire north coast of New Guinea - Geelvink Islands - Auri Islands - Amsterdam Island - western end of New Guinea - Den Weg Islands - Aiduma Island - Kai Islands - Darwin (3,309 nautical miles).  
 9th July–18th August: Darwin - Tanimbar Islands, Indonesia - Wyndham - Broome (1,514 nm) - Wyndham - Tanimbar Islands - Darwin (1,541 nm) - Tanimbar Islands - Wyndham - Broome (1,550 nm) - Wyndham - Tanimbar Islands - Darwin (1,541 nm).

### 2019

- 1st–28th June: Cairns - north coast of Australia - Broome - Darwin - Broome.

## Appendix 2. Additional scientific names

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Loggerhead Turtle <i>Caretta caretta</i>                            | Long-tailed Honey Buzzard <i>Henicopernis longicauda</i> |
| Green Turtle <i>Chelonia midas</i>                                  | Papuan Hornbill <i>Rhyticeros plicatus</i>               |
| Flatback Turtle <i>Natator depressus</i>                            | Rainbow Bee-eater <i>Merops ornatus</i>                  |
| Stoke's Sea Snake <i>Astrotia stokesii</i>                          | Australian Hobby <i>Falco longipennis</i>                |
| Spectacled Sea Snake <i>Hydrophis elegans</i>                       | Sulphur-crested Cockatoo <i>Cacatua galerita</i>         |
| MacDowell's (Small-headed) Sea Snake<br><i>Hydrophis macdowelli</i> | Black-capped Lory <i>Lorius lory</i>                     |
| Olive-headed Sea Snake <i>Hydrophis major</i>                       | Rainbow Pitta <i>Pitta iris</i>                          |
| Great Hammerhead Shark <i>Sphyrna mokarran</i>                      | Eastern Hooded Pitta <i>Pitta novaeguineae</i>           |
| Whale Shark <i>Rhincodon typus</i>                                  | Banda Honeyeater <i>Lichmera deningeri</i>               |
| Blainville's Beaked Whale <i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>            | Biak Myzomela <i>Myzomela rubrobrunnea</i>               |
| Dwarf Spinner Dolphin <i>Stenella roseiventris</i>                  | Tanimbar Friarbird <i>Philemon plumigenis</i>            |
| Tanimbar Scrubfowl <i>Megapodius tenimberensis</i>                  | New Guinea Friarbird <i>Philemon novaeguineae</i>        |
| Biak Scrubfowl <i>Megapodius geelvinkianus</i>                      | Little Friarbird <i>Philemon citreogularis</i>           |
| Metallic Pigeon <i>Columba vitiensis</i>                            | Banda Sea Gerygone <i>Gerygone dorsalis</i>              |
| Geelvink Imperial Pigeon <i>Ducula geelvinkiana</i>                 | Brown Oriole <i>Oriolus szalayi</i>                      |
| White-bibbed Fruit Dove <i>Ptilinopus rivoli</i>                    | Charming Fantail <i>Rhipidura opistherythra</i>          |
| Rose-crowned Fruit Dove <i>Ptilinopus regina</i>                    | Biak Fantail <i>Rhipidura kordensis</i>                  |
| Claret-breasted Fruit Dove <i>Ptilinopus viridis</i>                | Kai Fantail <i>Rhipidura assimilis</i>                   |
| Papuan Frogmouth <i>Podargus papuensis</i>                          | Crinkle-collared Manucode <i>Manucodia chalybatus</i>    |
| White-crowned Cuckoo <i>Caliechthrus leucolophus</i>                | Welcome Swallow <i>Hirundo neoxena</i>                   |
| Channel-billed Cuckoo <i>Scythrops novaehollandiae</i>              | Pacific Swallow <i>Hirundo tahitica</i>                  |
| Ivory-billed Coucal <i>Centropus menbeki</i>                        | Kai Kecil White-eye <i>Zosterops uropygialis</i>         |
| Great-billed Heron <i>Ardea sumatrana</i>                           | Ashy-bellied White-eye <i>Zosterops citrinella</i>       |
| Eastern Reef Egret <i>Egretta sacra</i>                             | Biak Long-tailed Starling <i>Aplonis magna</i>           |
| Bush Stone-curlew <i>Burhinus grallarius</i>                        | Eurasian Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i>             |
| Greater Sand Plover <i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>                 | Salvadori's Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum keiense</i>          |
| Australian Pratincole <i>Stiltia isabella</i>                       | Sahul Sunbird <i>Cinnyris clementiae</i>                 |



# Seabird reports 2023

by Capt Stephen Chapman, MN

In the year 2023 reports of birds at sea were received from the following observers, and will be filed for adding to the database.

**Lt Cdr Philip Boak** was deployed on HMS *Scott* on operations in the North Atlantic for a full year from July 2022 to July 2023. Over this period, there were numerous sightings of seabirds, landbirds and other wildlife, including whales, dolphins, turtles and flying insects. The nature of the tasking often meant that exact locations are not available for publication. Full records were rendered to the UK Hydrographic Office at the Secret Level. An account of some of the more memorable incidents and wildlife encounters follows.

In August 2022, whilst enroute to Cape Verde for a scheduled port visit there were numerous sightings of a small brown shearwater. Given the location, these could be the endemic Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*. For a short period it was necessary to anchor off Cape Verde. At night, the anchor lights and deck lights functioned as a giant moth-trap, with large numbers of hawk-moths alighting on the ship, including the Vine Hawk-moth *Hippotion celerio* and Convolvulus Hawk-moth *Agrius convolvuli*. A Praying Mantis *Mantis religiosa* was also spotted onboard. Next month in Mid-Atlantic, the bridge watchkeepers were startled by the appearance of a Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*, several-hundred miles from the nearest land. The bird alighted upon the port bridge-wing pelorus, before taking off and circling the ship and heading-out once again into the distance. Quick reactions from the watchkeepers enabled the bird to be photographed as it flew over the ship. Over the month of December, there were frequent sightings of flocks of Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, once again far from land in the Mid-Atlantic. A couple landed on the ship. In mid-December the ship 'crossed-the-line',

heading enroute to Fortaleza, Brazil, for a routine port visit. On transit there were excellent views of the Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*. The birds would alight on the foremast, or fly close to the ship's bow-wave. The ship would disturb large numbers of flying-fish, which would 'fly' a considerable distance along the sea surface, with many a hapless fish being deftly intercepted by the patrolling boobies, an excellent example of a human-wildlife interaction. The Red-foots did not always have it their own way. A marauding Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* spent several hours harrying, in an attempt to make them disgorge their hard-won flying fish! The year 2023 was relatively quiet in terms of wildlife spotted Mid-Atlantic. There would be occasional glimpses of shearwater and petrel species, but exact identification proved impossible due to their speed, distance and fleeting nature of the encounter. Whilst making landfall at Saint Lucia in January 2023, the number of birds spotted increased, with numerous Brown Boobies flying around the ship.



**Plate 219.** Brown Booby in front of St Lucia's iconic Pitons.  
© Lt Katie McManus RN.

**Malcolm Calvert** reported from a voyage on board MV *Bolette* in September and October. Noteworthy was an estimated 500 feeding flock of Gannets at *Sula bassana* 44.6N 8.2E.

**Simon Cook** submitted 11 pages of daily sightings from MV *Ortelius* in January and February from Ushuaia, and with favourable weather to the Antarctic Peninsula, Bellingshausen Sea, Peter 1 Island, Amundsen Sea, Ross Sea, Balleny Islands, Campbell Island, Enderby Island (Auckland Islands), Snares Island to Bluff reaching 77°S near the date line. At 62°S 62°W he encountered Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea* numbering 1,000 to 2,000. North of Thurston Island he saw three Lesser Snow Petrels *Pagodroma nivea* and in drift ice in the Amundsen Sea reported 33; and 49 Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea* all in moult. At 65°S 160°E on 13 Feb a Hutton's Shearwater *Puffinus huttoni* on the water with other shearwaters, is the furthest south record we have of this New Zealand South Island endemic. On Campbell Island some notable species were: Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata* 30+ and four chicks, one being fed, Erect-crested Penguin *Eudyptes sclateri* 10 (ashore to moult) and Eastern Rockhopper Penguin *E. filholi* 14. On Enderby Is were close views of five Yellow-eyed Penguin *Megedyptes antipodes*.

Next month six pages of daily sightings came from MV *Island Sky* in March on a voyage from Ushuaia to Antarctica, South Georgia, Falkland Islands and return to Ushuaia. 20 Black-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregatta tropica* at 63.2°S to the north of Anvers Is. is a southerly sighting for this storm-petrel. Leaving Spert Island on 5 March c. 2,000 Wilson's Storm-petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*, lots of Giant Petrels *Macronectes* sp and skuas and small numbers of Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* were seen feeding on blubber and oils from a Weddell Seal *Leptonychotes weddellii* being eaten by Killer Whales *Orcinus orca*, at 63.9°S, 61.2°W. Close views in the fog and pictures of Sooty Albatross *Phoebastria fusca* at 52.5°S 50.7°W, on 14 March, east of Cape Pembroke, Falkland Islands was the only sighting of this species on this passage.

**WO Steve Copley** submitted an eight page report from MV *Queen Elizabeth* sailing the North Pacific from the East China Sea to Alaska and Victoria, British Columbia during May and June. Multiple sightings of South Polar Skuas *Stercorarius maccormicki* around 39°N 142°E are noteworthy. Notes comment on the difficulties of distinguishing between Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris* and Sooties *A. grisea*. The report included mostly small numbers of Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis* and Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*.

The following selected records show that even big cruise ships can provide exciting birding: Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata*, Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba*, Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus*, Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*, Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*, Cassin's Auklet *Ptychoramphus aleuticus* and Fork-tailed Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma furcata*.

Please continue sending your records to: [data@rnbws.org.uk](mailto:data@rnbws.org.uk) - thank you.

## Landbirds at sea - Great Britain

Notes on landbirds at sea around Great Britain during August/September 2023.

Embarked MV *Hebridean Sky* Portsmouth 24th August, disembarked Portsmouth 7th September. The ports of call were as follows:

25/8	Fowey, Cornwall
26/8	Scilly Isles - Treco & St. Agnes
27/8	Fishguard, Pembrokeshire
28/8	Douglas, Isle of Man
29/8	Londonderry, Ireland
30/8	St. Kilda
31/8	Thurso, Caithness
1/9	Unst, Shetland
2/9	Lerwick, Shetland
3/9	Aberdeen
4/9	Eyemouth, Berwickshire - for Alnwick Castle & Lindisfarne
5/9	Whitby, North Yorkshire
6/9	Ipswich, Suffolk

**Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres***

25/8, 2 flying around the stern on the approach to Fowey, position not noted. 30/8, 1 flying NE between St. Kilda and the Flannan Islands, 16.13 @ 58° 10' N, 007° 50' W. 6/9, 6 birds flying steadily west towards land; for position see Meadow Pipit below.

**Rock Pipit *Anthus petrosus***

31/8, 2 flying around the ship on the approach to Scrabster, Thurso, (1 nm offshore), one landed on a zodiac, position not noted. 5/9 2 aboard 18.15 with at least one still aboard at 19.30, 54° 23' N, 000° 17.4' W, 6 nm offshore, heading south from Whitby. One was outside the lounge during the Captain's Farewell Cocktail Party - seen through the window!

**Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis***

6/9, 6 aboard, some very tame birds. 3 at 05.45, then 6 from 06.27 until at least 07.45; a passenger saw one fly off to land as the ship passed Felixstowe and entered the River Orwell. The birds spent a lot of time feeding on small flies that had presumably come aboard during the night. 06.00 posn. 52° 28' N, 002° 07' W, 13 nm E of Lowestoft.

**Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba***

5/9, 1 aboard at the same time as the 2 Rock Pipits (19.00), seen in flight, on deck 7 and on the bow.

**Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea***

7/9, 1 bird dropped down to the ship from on high - looked for but not seen aboard, 06.25 @ 50° 36' N, 000° 46.4' W, 6 nm S of Selsy Bill.

**Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe***

30/8, 1 juv. at 17.05 at the Flannans, 58° 18' N, 007° 36' W, flying beside the ship and landed briefly on deck 3. 4/9 1 juv. aboard 06.50-07.40 at 55° 56' N, 002° 06' W, 2 nm off St. Abbs Head, very close views.



Plate 220. Rock Pipit. © S Cook



Plate 221. Northern Wheatear. © S Cook





Plate 222. Meadow Pipit. © S Cook

## Selected seabird highlights from the ornithological press

The following is a trawl through press and bird journals that feature seabird distribution news that have crossed my desk in the last year.

### Black-browed Albatross

#### *Thalassarche melanophris*

As noted in the *British Birds*' report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2022, one of the highlights of the year was undoubtedly the return of the Black-browed Albatross to RSPB Bempton Cliffs, Yorkshire on 30 March through 3 August. A further two sightings of Black-browed Albatross came from sea watches at opposite ends of the country: Prawle Point, Devon 4th CalendarYear (CY)+, 18 September, Lamba Ness, Unst, Shetland 4CY+, 16 June, (*Brit. Birds* 116: 572).

### Zino's/Fea's/Desertas Petrel

#### *Pterodroma madeira/feae/deserta*

With the ringing and observations of Zino's Petrel off Madeira it is interesting to see how these species may disperse. Sightings of the three related species are reported from a Pendeen watch, Cornwall 1CY+, 2 August; at sea, 10 km south of St Mary's, Isles of Scilly 2CY+, 26 August in 2022. In 2021 a sighting came from Fife Ness, 2CY+, 30 August, presumed same bird in north-east Scotland at Girdle Ness, 2CY+, 30 August, and same at Donmouth, on 30 August. Then one at Flamborough Head, 1CY+, 22 November, (*Brit. Birds* 116: 573).

The breeding of Zino's is confined to mountains of the Pico do Areeiro, Madeira; while Fea's breeds on the Cape Verde Islands and Desertas breeds Bugio, Desertas Is.

### Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* sightings around Fea's Petrel colony

Peter Stronach reports Black-capped Petrel sightings around a Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* colony in Santa Antão, Cape Verde. There is a recent series of sightings from the Cape Verde Islands: 6 February 2016 - one found in centre of Santa Antão; 11 March 2017 - sea watching record from El Barril headland, Sao Nicolau; 13 February 2018 - an individual mist-netted in Santa Antão; 28 April 2019 - at sea between Fogo and Cima; 6 February 2020 - at sea between Raso and Sao Nicolau and again 29 January 2021 - at sea between Fogo and Cima. All these sightings fall within the period that they would typically be found during the breeding season in the Caribbean at new moon and peak petrel activity.

The following sightings were made during sea watching from land: 17 February - 134+ Fea's Petrels and one Black-capped Petrel in pre-breeding rafts of petrels on the sea east of Ponta do Sol in NE Santa Antão; 19 February - same area checked three Black-capped amongst rafting Fea's, same location; and 20th February - two Black-capped amongst rafting Fea's, same location. This number of birds is completely unprecedented in the Western Palearctic. The Seabird Group *Newsletter* 153: 4-5

### White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*

A White-chinned Petrel on Orkney in 25 May 2020 constituted the first record for Britain and the Western Palearctic. This paper details the occurrence and summarises the species' identification, distribution and movements, conservation status and vagrancy history. It demonstrates the value of high quality images in acceptance of sightings by the Rarities Committee.

White-chinned Petrel is extremely rare north of the equator and, prior to the Orkney sighting, all records were from the United States. In the Pacific, there have been four records off California: off San Mateo County on 18 October 2009 and 15 September 2015, off Santa Barbara County on 6 September 2011 and off Marin County on 16 October 2011 (Howell *et al.* 2014; Lees & Gilroy 2021).

This Orkney sighting represents the first record for the eastern North Atlantic and for the Western Palearctic. Subsequently, however, a different individual (with a smaller white chin-patch) was photographed at the Porcupine Bank, around 200 miles west of Ireland on 15 September 2021 (García-Barcelona *et al.* 2022). (*Brit. Birds* 116: 707–711).

### Barolo Shearwater *Puffinus baroli*

As reported in *British Birds* despite its perilous conservation status, the Barolo Shearwater is clearly occurring occasionally in British waters, with a peak in the late summer and early autumn sea watching season. Records come from all coasts but with the expected bias towards the southwest in autumn. Additionally, a number of prospecting birds have been discovered in summer in Manx Shearwater *P. puffinus* colonies. (*Brit. Birds* 116: 574).

The breeding range is restricted to warmer waters of Madeira, Canary Islands, Cape Verde Islands and the Azores. Outside the breeding season it is found at sea near breeding sites within North Atlantic.

### Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

A new addition to the British List in 2019 (*Brit. Birds* 114: 570–628), now more sightings: a second calendar year (CY) at Droskyn Castle, Perranporth, Cornwall, found moribund, 22–23 February. Another 1CY+. Hove, Sussex, taken into care, 2 January. (*Brit. Birds* 116: 575).

### Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*

The sighting of a Kelp Gull at Grafham Water, Cambridgeshire 3CY, 1–10 August 2022 adds a new species to the British list. As *British Birds* reports, the occurrence of Kelp Gull in Europe is a recent phenomenon but, since the first, records have come from a widespread range of locations including a number of recent sightings on the near Continent - including a record from Paris - perhaps put the species into the category of expected vagrant. It returned to the same site briefly in 2023. (*Brit. Birds* 116: 569).

### New records of Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea* in Uruguay

Joaquín Muñoz, Diego Castelli, Sebastián Jiménez & Martín Abreu report five new records of Blue Petrel in Uruguay. Three individuals were found stranded on the coast in 2005, 2016 and 2018, and two were recorded at sea in the economic exclusive zone in 2021 and 2022. These few records suggest that the species' presence in Uruguayan waters is no more than occasional. However, its similarity to, and association with prions, together with the fact that this petrel does not usually approach fishing vessels, could mean that it is under-recorded. *Bull. BOC* 143 (1), 132–135.

### First specimen records of Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus persicus* on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts

James Bradley, Sidney Shema, and Jaap Gijsbertsen data clarify the status of the Persian Shearwater on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts. They provide additional biometric data to complement published sources, and extend the western Indian Ocean non-breeding range of the nominate subspecies of Persian Shearwater approximately 2,000 km south from northern Somalia. *Bull. BOC* 143 (1), 74–84.

### Occurrence of Leach's Storm- petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous* near the Saint Peter & Saint Paul Archipelago, Brazil

Located on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the São Pedro e São Paulo Archipelago (SPSPA); 00°55'N 29°20'W is a group of rocky islands c.1,100 km east of Natal, Brazil, and 520 km from the Fernando de Noronha Archipelago. This island group occupies an area of c.1.7

ha, with a maximum elevation of 18 m above sea level. Historically, the area was explored for fishing. More recently, it was listed as a Marine Protected Area. Against this background this report comprises the second of two documented accounts of Leach's Storm-petrel in SPSPA waters.

Lucas Penna Soares Santos, Camila Brasilino Botelho de Araújo, Marco A Antonio Carvalho de Souza, Jorge Eduardo Lins Oliveira and Danielle de Lima Viana, *Seabird* 35 (2023): 85–91.

## Phenomenal breeding success on Gough Island

In 2021 Vanessa Amaral-Rogers and Steffen Oppel, of RSPB report, a large consortium of conservation organisations led by RSPB and Tristan da Cunha tried to eradicate invasive non-native House Mice *Mus musculus* from the World Heritage Site Gough Island - a rugged volcanic island in the middle of the South Atlantic that is home to millions of seabirds. Over the past decades the mice had started eating seabird eggs and chicks (and latterly adult birds too), and several species were decreasing due to mouse predation. However, despite heroic efforts under challenging weather conditions, the mouse eradication operation was not successful.

At any one time there are seabirds breeding on Gough. Some species breed during the summer, others during the winter. Although efforts were not successful in eradicating the mice efforts led to an enormous reduction of the number of mice. As a result, the winter breeders came through first and these were staggering: the Critically Endangered MacGillivray's Prion *Pachyptila macgillivrayi*

increased breeding success from an average of 6% with mice (including many years of 0% success) to 82% in 2022, whilst the endangered Atlantic Petrel *Pterodroma incerta* had a 63% breeding success - more than double the previous year's rate and well above average. Gough Island is the global stronghold for both species. Results for the Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* came through in October, with a massive increase from an average of 32% to 76% breeding success. Almost every Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* in the world breeds on Gough Island. Finally, the numbers for the Near Threatened Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea*, another species for which Gough is significant, and the results are similarly impressive, their breeding success rose from 30% to 75%. All in all, the seabirds on Gough had a phenomenal breeding season this year and there was no indication of any mouse predation. Although we have long expected it to be the case, we now have evidence that removing mice will have huge benefits for this World Heritage Site. *The Seabird Group Newsletter* 152: 3–4.

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# Book Review

**The North Sea Bird Club 1979–2019. Birds, bats and beasties - forty years of offshore wildlife recording** by Andrew Thorpe.

Published by the North Sea Bird Club. Paperback, pp240, ISBN 978-9999882-5-8, RRP £17.50. Obtainable from the author; andrew.thorpe147@btinternet.com



Imagine life in the depths of the North Sea, 'wet and blowing hard', where you find a long-eared owl staring back at you from the darkness of an oil rig far offshore. That was life for the members of the North Sea Bird Club, who contributed to a unique organisation observing the natural world in

some of the harshest conditions imaginable. Using anecdotes and historical written accounts, the books author and club recorder of two decades (half the life of the club), Andrew Thorpe, presents the definitive report of the North Sea Bird Club.



**Plate 223.** White-tailed Eagle on N Sea oil vessel *Island Constructor*, September 2017. © Barry Valentine



**Plate 224.** Long- and Short-eared Owls on a N Sea Platform, October 2015. © Steve Welham

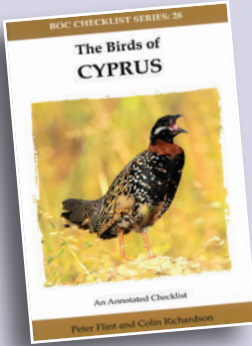
Opening its doors in 1979, the club's founders produced their inaugural report of sightings in the North Sea before the club officially existed. From here, they developed a membership of keen amateur observers and importantly relied on an unlikely partnership between commerce and academics to spread observers across the North Sea's oil infrastructure. At the time such collaboration between environmentalists and industry was a novel achievement. The club offered a unique opportunity to collect data from an otherwise inaccessible environment. The book glimpses a life unimagined by most and describes the difficulties of monitoring birds in the early eighties, with available technology of poor quality and communicating with observers a constant challenge.

The North Sea Bird Club recorded the movements of seabirds and land birds at sea for forty years and has had a long association with the RNBWS. It is with sadness that the club closed its doors in 2019, ending four decades of maritime avian observation, which will undoubtedly leave a gap in our understanding of the birds in the North Sea in the years to come. Written as a celebration of the clubs' achievements the author also takes pains to describe the reasons the club suffered dwindling interest leading to its closure and those clubs looking to avoid a similar fate should take note. Highly recommended.

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**The Birds of Cyprus: An Annotated Checklist:** by Peter Flint and Colin Richardson. Published by the British Ornithologists' Club ([www.boc-online.org](http://www.boc-online.org)); ISBN 9780952288695. Paperback; 524 pages, 32 plates with 65 colour photos and two colour maps, three b/w illustrations, 13 tables. £45 from the Natural History Book Service <https://www.nhbs.com>.



More than 30 years have passed since the last edition of this checklist was published, so this new book is timely. It is also far more comprehensive in its scope, given the huge advances in electronic access to information in recent years.

Readers of *Sea Swallow* will probably recognise one of the two co-authors, namely Colin Richardson, who is the RNBWS representative in Cyprus, and the author of several articles in *Sea Swallow* on autumn migration seawatching from the Cyprus shore.

By coincidence, the Birds of Cyprus book arrived on the same day as a report in the press headlined a jump in the incidence of illegal trapping of migrating songbirds in Cyprus. This caught my eye, for I lived for much of my boyhood in Cyprus and was given to long solo wanderings. On one such I came across a man seated by a net between trees, who thereupon plucked a songbird from the net, roasted it there and then on a small fire, and handed it to me to eat.

Illegal trapping is well covered in this comprehensive review, as is the history of ornithology on the island. We learn for instance that in 1850 it was a naval surgeon, William Baikie, who published the first table of observations of waterbird migrations on the north coast, where today Colin Richardson concentrates his seawatching endeavours. We learn too that in 1957 Dr Bill Bourne was a founder member of the Cyprus Ornithological Society, which evolved to become *BirdLife Cyprus*. There is also a sprinkling of RNBWS names in the list of observers, while the presence of the RAF base at Akrotiri has meant that RAFOS teams have been significant contributors over the years.

Annual recording and publication of bird records have taken place on Cyprus for over 65 years. The first thing I learn from this latest update is that that of the 404 species covered in detail no fewer than 380 are wholly or partly migratory: hardly surprising perhaps, given the geographical position of Cyprus between Europe and Africa. Another feature is that while the number of observations has increased, both in scale and areas covered, and while some species have increased in number, there has been an alarming decrease in the numbers of passage migrants and winter visitors - largely mirroring trends worldwide it should be said. On the plus side, *Birdlife Cyprus* is a thriving and vigorous organisation which is carrying out valuable conservation work.

Overall verdict: I think this book, with its excellent photographs, succeeds in its aim to appeal to a wide readership, from casual birder to academic, and I'm sure will be required reading for Cyprus birders for years to come.

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Plates 225 & 226. (top) Zino's Petrel, Madeira. (bottom) Ringing Zino's Petrel © both Jack Crowe