

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 29th August 2019

The winter Sunshine Coast pelagic trip scheduled for 14th July had to be cancelled at the last minute owing to problems with the boat. Unfortunately the replacement trip could not occur until 29th August, which is later in the winter season than is ideal. Still, our intrepid band of 22 seabirders gathered expectantly at the private dock in Mooloolaba with plenty of time to spare, and we got underway at 0615. We motored slowly up the Mooloolah River, then exited the seaway with a light easterly wind in our faces. The weather had been less than hopeful in the run-up to the trip, with mostly westerly winds, although they had swung to the east in the last two days.

Good numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, and couple of Australasian Gannets were just offshore, but for the most part we focused on speeding towards the continental shelf. Slightly further offshore a nice subadult Brown Booby gave us a close, albeit brief flypast, and we saw our first Hutton's Shearwaters of the day. But more attention-grabbing were big numbers of Humpback Whales, on their migration from Great Barrier Reef calving grounds their Antarctic feeding quarters. There were many breaching animals,



Subadult Brown Booby, photograph by Richard Fuller.



Our vessel, Crusader 1, at the berth waiting for the participants to embark. The vessel comfortably accommodates 23 birders, with ample seating and handrails throughout.

and we couldn't help but stop to watch the spectacular show! We saw at least 18 different animals during the course of the journey out, a memorable experience.

After a couple of hours we entered Brisbane waters and eventually arrived at the continental shelf in around 800 metres of water. We cut the engines and began deploying burley from the back of the boat. The weather was reasonably calm with only light variable winds. A steady stream of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters came to investigate the burley, but none of the birds seemed especially hungry and in general birds didn't linger long.

Presently a superb Providence Petrel arrived, followed by about four more during the drift, but similarly these birds didn't linger. As breeding species, the Providence Petrel is endemic to Australia, breeding only on Lord Howe

Island and Philip Island (just south of Norfolk Island). Providence Petrels are winter breeders, and wandering birds typically range off the east coast of Australia between March and November, after which they migrate to the northern Pacific (although occasional birds can be seen at any time of year). Listed as globally threatened by the IUCN, the Lord Howe Island population is estimated at around 32,000 pairs, while only 10-100 pairs survive on Philip Island. Fortunately, the successful eradication of pigs from Lord Howe Island means that the species is now increasing there.

Presently several Hutton's Shearwaters appeared, and it was interesting to see good numbers of this species on the continental shelf—we are accustomed to seeing them close inshore on the Sunshine Coast pelagic, but much less so on the continental shelf. At this time of year, birds are on their way back from their winter range around much of the coastline of Australia to their breeding grounds in the mountains of South Island, New Zealand.



Series of excellent images of Humpback Whales breaching in the Coral Sea off Mooloolaba on 29th August 2019. We saw at least 18 different individuals, and most were actively breaching or slapping their pectoral fins onto the water surface. A spectacular show! Photographs by Gillian Matthew.



Providence Petrel in the Coral Sea off Mooloolaba (Brisbane waters) on 29th August 2019. Photograph by Gillian Matthew.

The Crested Terns were hungry and voraciously feeding on burley, but the petrels were not super interested, and eventually it was time to restart the engines and commence our journey back. Several more Humpback Whales were encountered on the way back, but there was nothing new bird-wise.

We arrived back into port at 3.30. A fairly quiet day on the sea, but livened up by a spectacular show from the Humpback Whales.

Our spring trips are on 27th Oct and 24th Nov. Contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au if you interested in coming along.

Story by Richard Fuller

PARTICIPANTS:

Margie Baker, Tyde Bands, Sarah Beavis, John Brinnand, Susan Brinnand, Robert Bush, Andrew Christodoulou, Patrick Colley, Richard Fuller, Lenn Isidore, Meg Johnson, Brian Johnson, Wayne Kroll, James Martin, Gillian Matthew, Tomas Poch, Jean-Cesar Puechmarin, Julie Sarna, David Simpson, Carolyn Stewart, Jamie Walker, Dylan Westaway

SPECIES: Total (max. at once)

Crested Tern 52 (7)
Providence Petrel 5 (2)
Pterodroma sp 1 (1)
Wedge-tailed Shearwater 148 (27)
Hutton's Shearwater 29 (6)
Australasian Gannet 2 (1)
Brown Booby 1 (1)
Humpback Whale 18 (6)



Participants aboard Crusader I on the August 2019 Sunshine Coast pelagic (photo: RF).