

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 27th October 2019

With a decent easterly airflow, hopes were high in the few days prior to the trip, but frustratingly the wind direction had turned around to the north-westerly quarter. Still, there was a sense of expectation as the 21 participants converged at the wharf on the Mooloolaba River on Sunday 27th October 2019. At about 0615, we filed on board the *Crusader* and began cruising slowly downriver. Crossing the choppy seaway we were greeted by a 15-knot wind and mid-size northerly swell, both of which moderated during the day. We were seeing very few birds around us, with only small numbers of Crested Terns and a lone Wedge-tailed Shearwater for company in the early part of the journey.

All of sudden, about 8 km offshore a gannet-like bird took off from just off the port side of the boat. I think most of us were expecting it to be a late Australasian Gannet, but it turned out to be a magnificent adult Masked Booby. Breeding around tropical Australia, this species is seldom seen coastally, and there are rather few records from SE Queensland. Photographers reeled off some shots, but it was moving fast, and we were moving fast, making for less than award-winning pics! But we could



Adult Masked Booby, the dark eye indicating that this is a bird of the subspecies tasmani, which breeds on Lord Howe, Norfolk and the Kermadec Islands. A scarce bird in SE Queensland. Photo by Richard Fuller.

clearly discern that the eye on this bird was dark, making it a bird of the subspecies *tasmani*, which breeds on Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands in Australia, and also the Kermadec Islands north of New Zealand. The population of this subspecies only numbers about 2,000 birds, and we were very pleased to have encountered this spectacular bird.

We resumed our journey eastward, seeing no more seabirds aside from a few Crested Terns until we came upon a fishing boat. Unfortunately it held just seven Crested Terns, although some people

glimpsed an unidentified seabird nearby, which was perhaps a Brown Booby. Resuming our vigil over the empty seas we pushed yet further east making good speed, until we eventually started seeing small groups of Short-tailed Shearwaters, actually rather poignant because we would

have expected to see much larger numbers at this time of year, and several of the southern Australian breeding colonies have had very few birds return for breeding so far this year.

We reached the continental shelf at -26.7394,153.7320 at about 0930 and began deploying burley from the back of the boat. We'd been having trouble attracting birds to the slick in recent Sunshine Coast pelagic trips, and had tried various recipes all to no avail. For this trip, I decided to make the burley myself, mixing up chicken mince and tuna oil with finely chopped fresh hardyheads and pilchards. I also sprayed a small amount of menhaden oil into the water periodically during the drift. It was clearly working a treat. Birds began appearing almost straight away, with a nice Sooty Tern flying low over the boat and a group of Crested Terns and a couple of Wilson's Storm-petrels coming to feed in the slick. Soon, a couple of Tahiti Petrels appeared, and one of them also came to feed – nice! A group of Short-tailed Shearwaters whizzed by, but



Sooty Tern, photograph by Stephen Murray.

weren't especially interested in coming in to feed.

Numbers of Wilson's Storm-petrels kept increasing, with up to 14 birds visible at any one time, but scan as hard as we might, there were no other storm-petrel species in there, which was a little disappointing. But at least we felt the burley was doing its job, and attracting all the birds in the vicinity to come and look and also to feed – there were seabirds continuously present for all three hours that we were deploying burley. A couple of Tahiti Petrels came in close, even landing on the water at one stage, and repeatedly coming to the slick. Eventually a Providence Petrel appeared, which showed really well, although another *Pterodroma* stayed too far off to identify with certainty. Time was ticking on, but just before we left the shelf, a jaeger appeared and did a close flyby, and also landed in the slick – a handsome Pomarine Jaeger. We set our



Wilson's Storm-petrels were feeding continuously in the slick for three hours. Photograph by Ralph Brown.

westward course perhaps a little disappointed with the species diversity at the shelf, but the continuous supply of birds had kept us all entertained, and I was delighted that we have finally found a burley recipe that seems to work well for this location. Roll on 24th November, which will be the last Sunshine Coast pelagic of 2019. Contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au if you interested in coming along.

Story by Richard Fuller

PARTICIPANTS:

Ralph Brown, Michael Dawson, Scott Fox, Richard Fuller, Kevin Gaston, Nikolas Haass, Mary Hynes, Lenn Isidore, Chris Lester,

Rosemary Lester, Dali Lin, James Martin, Gillian Matthew, Braden McDonald, Chris Murray, Stephen Murray, Maggie Overend, Carla Perkins, Rebecca Stroud, Matt Vinicombe, Jamie Walker.

SPECIES: Total (max. at once)

- Pomarine Jaeger 1 (1)
- Jaeger sp 1 (1)
- Sooty Tern 1 (1)
- Crested Tern 20 (5)
- Wilson's Storm-petrel 39 (14)
- Providence Petrel 1 (1)
- Pterodroma sp 1 (1)
- Tahiti Petrel 11 (2)
- Wedge-tailed Shearwater 4 (2)
- Short-tailed Shearwater 12 (7)
- Masked Booby 1 (1)
- Unidentified dolphin 5 (3)



Tahiti Petrels made several close passes by the boat. Photograph by Richard Fuller.



A Pomarine Jaeger made a late appearance just before we left the continental shelf. Photograph by Richard Fuller.