

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 12th July 2020

Travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic had forced us to cancel our planned March and April trips, and so we were delighted to finally get underway again with a departure on 12th July.

Expectant birders began gathering from 6am at the Sunshine Coast Afloat Jetty. The weather was rather calm, with a light northerly wind blowing and a light swell. Good conditions for boating, but not ideal for producing a broad diversity of winter seabirds. At this time of year, sustained SE winds are ideal. Nevertheless, we loaded the burley barrel, today with 10kg chicken mince, 5L tuna oil, 2kg of pulverised fresh pilchards, 1kg of chopped fish guts, and 2kg of chopped squid. We laced the mixture with dried mealworms and a few rice bubbles out at sea. After the safety briefing, we motored slowly down the river, keenly looking forward to a day out on the ocean.

Very few birds were seen on the journey out, with just a few Australasian Gannets, Crested Terns and a scattering of Hutton's Shearwaters. In many ways, a concerning lack of birds. A good number of Humpback Whales were passing through though,



Providence Petrel, photograph by Ged Tranter.



Black-bellied Storm-petrel. Note the extensive black hood with irregular lower edge, smudgy centreline to belly, noticeable dark bar on the greater coverts, and legs projecting beyond the tail tip. Photo by Ged Tranter.

with animals in view much of the time.

A nice Providence Petrel appeared as we got near to the shelf, and eventually we cut the engines over 450m of water on the shelf break. A few Providence Petrels showed up almost straight away, and fed on the slick, together with a posse of Crested Terns.

Small numbers of Providence Petrels were in view for most of the time, and after a while, a trio of Hutton's Shearwaters zoomed past. It was clear that bird num-

bers were very low, and we worried whether this could be a symptom of generalised seabird declines.

Not long before it was time to leave, the malaise was broken by the sudden appearance of Wilson's Storm-petrel, which stopped to feed in the slick for a little while before continuing on its way. But the star

bird appeared just as we were about to pack up and start the engines—a superb Black-bellied Storm-petrel that gave close views on repeated passes around the boat. This was a welcome lifer for several on board, and a new Brisbane bird for many. Black-bellied Storm-petrel is a regular winter visitor off the Queensland coast, but despite the fact it occurs north to the equator and beyond, it generally appears in much smaller numbers on the Sunshine Coast pelagic in comparison to the Southport pelagic.

We started the engines, and navigated slowly up the slick, again seeing the Black-bellied Storm-petrel, but little else of note bird-wise. However, we did see some bulky dolphins / small whales that initially got us excited, but they turned out to be a lovely little group of Risso's Dolphins, which was excellent—and at least one of the animals was surprisingly pale-flanked. Risso's Dolphins are typically found in deeper water (400m+) but relatively close to land. They are squid lovers, and perhaps attracted by the squid that was in the burley. After a

good look, we went full steam for Mooloolaba.

Presently, a couple of fishing boats appeared in view, and we headed alongside them to see what birds might be around. A couple of adult Brown Boobies were perched along with about 30 Crested Terns.

One or two brief stops for showy Humpback Whales on the way back wowed the crowd, and we had several animals very close to the boat, having to stop to avoid them on a couple of occasions. Overall, small numbers of birds, but the Black-bellied Storm-petrel was nice, and conditions were so pleasant that an enjoyable day was had by all. The next two trips in 2020 will be in October and November. Contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au if you interested in coming along.

Report by Richard Fuller



Two adult Brown Boobies perched on a fishing boat not far from the shelf, but inside Sunshine Coast waters. Photograph by Richard Fuller.

<p>PARTICIPANTS: Louis Backstrom, Andrew Christodoulou, Jo Culican, Scott Fox, Rick Franks, Richard Fuller, Matteo Grilli, Nikolas Haass, Andy Jensen, Brian Johnson, Wayne Kroll, James Martin, Braden McDonald, Davydd McDonald, Chris Murray, Stephen Murray, John O'Shea, Dan Pagotto, Greg Roberts, Carolyn Stewart, Ged Tranter, Jamie Walker.</p>	<p>SPECIES: Total (max. at once)</p> <p>Australasian Gannet 23 (7)</p> <p>Brown Booby 2 (2)</p> <p>Crested Tern 60 (30)</p> <p>Black-bellied Storm-petrel 1 (1)</p> <p>Wilson's Storm-petrel 1 (1)</p> <p>Providence Petrel 22 (11)</p> <p>Hutton's Shearwater 8 (3)</p> <p>Humpback Whale 30 (8)</p> <p>Inshore Bottlenose Dolphin 2 (2)</p> <p>Risso's Dolphin 4 (4)</p>
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A super rainbow appeared. Photograph by Matteo Grilli.



A small group of Risso's Dolphins appeared in the slick just as we were leaving for home. Photo by Richard Fuller.