

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 15th November 2020

After poor weather forced the cancellation of our 25th October trip in what would have been good conditions for seabirding, we were somewhat dismayed to see the light winds from all the wrong directions in the run-up to the 15th November trip. Nevertheless, the optimism of Sunshine Coast seabirders is boundless and we looked forward to a day on the ocean.

We got underway at 0623 and motored down the river, past an Osprey enjoying its breakfast of a Black Rabbitfish, deftly avoiding injury from the terrifying (at least to humans) spines on the fish. 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 seabirds. Onboard, our burley barrel contained 12.5kg chicken mince, 5L tuna oil, 2kg of pulverised fresh pilchards and 2kg of chopped squid. We laced the mixture with dried mealworms out at sea.

Just beyond the seaway was a group of about 15 Little Terns, but there was no sign yet of the summer gathering of Common Terns or White-winged Terns—we'll be looking for those on our 6th December trip. Otherwise, birds on the journey out to the shelf were small numbers of Wedge-tailed



Little Tern, photograph by Greg Roberts.



Short-tailed Shearwater. Note the pale underwing flashes, feet trailing beyond short tail, and comparatively fine bill. Photo by Kye Turnbull.

Shearwaters, good numbers of Crested Terns, and three Brown Boobies.

We cut the engines over about 300m of water on the shelf break, and began drifting while deploying burley. Our drift took us due south at about 3km per hour. A couple of nice Tahiti Petrels showed up almost straight away, and they were eventually joined by a couple of Wilson's Storm-petrels.

Presently, a couple of *Onychoprion* terns showed up, and although they were distant and one of them appeared rather strikingly pale brown, both turned out to be Sooty Terns in photographs, showing characteristic dark distal part to the underwing, and strong white forehead blaze. In fact, Sooty Tern was going to be the bird of the day, with eventually 9 birds appearing, an unusually large number for these trips. A

recent analysis by Dr Brad Woodworth from the University of Queensland (<https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13630>) has shown that Sooty Tern declined at all major Great Barrier Reef breeding sites between 1979 and 2017 at an average annual rate of 2.67%, so it was good to see reasonable numbers today.

A couple of sharks appeared close to the boat, and although some photos were obtained, the identity remains not fully resolved. They appeared to be *Carcharhinus* species, but opinions as to the specific identity vary between Dusky Whaler *C. obscurus*, and Silky Shark *C. falciiformis*. Other non-bird wildlife was well-represented, with migrating butterflies including Tailed Emperor *Charaxes sempronius*, Caper White *Belenois java*, and Blue Tiger *Tirumala hamata*. A Common Grass-blue *Zizina labradus* perched on the boat was probably also a migrant, although could have been a stowaway. A dragonfly briefly landed on the boat, and turned out to be a Common Glider *Tramea loewii*.

A few more Tahiti Petrels appeared alongside small numbers of

Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, but it was clear we weren't going to have a seabird bonanza today. At 1230 we started the engines, and navigated slowly up the slick, noting a couple of close fly-by Sooty Terns. After a good look, we went full steam for Mooloolaba.

Presently, a fishing boat appeared in view, and we headed alongside them to see what birds might be around. Three adult Brown Boobies were perched along with a few Crested Terns.

About two-thirds of the way back, a shearwater appeared astern, and upon inspection its pale underwing flashes, feet trailing behind the tail, smaller size and zippy flight style revealed it to be a Short-tailed Shearwater.

By far the best sighting of the trip was an Olive-headed Sea Snake *Hydrophis major* close alongside the boat as we cruised back up the Mooloolah River. Unfortunately we couldn't get photos.

Overall, small numbers of birds on this trip, but conditions were pleasant that an enjoyable day was had by all. The final trip in 2020 will be on 6th December. Although the boat is currently full, contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au if you interested in joining the waiting list, or to join us in 2021.

Report by Richard Fuller

PARTICIPANTS: Penny Ackland, Louis Backstrom, Jo Culican, Michael Dawson, Rick Franks, Richard Fuller, Nikolas Haass, Mathias Jonsen, Bianca Keys, Wayne Kroll, Elliot Leach, David Lie, Richard Maar-schall, James Martin, Braden McDonald, Stephen Murray, John O'Shea, Helen Procter-Brown, Greg Roberts, Ged Tranter, Kye Turnbull, Jamie Walker, Russell Yong.



Osprey tucking into an unfortunate Black Rabbitfish beside the Mooloolah River, deftly avoiding being impaled by the spines that can cause excruciating pain to a human, giving rise to the ironic colloquial name for this fish "Happy Moments". Photograph by Richard Fuller.

SPECIES: Total (max. at once) Caper White Butterfly

Brown Booby 7 (3)
 Little Tern 15 (15)
 Crested Tern 79 (51)
 Sooty Tern 9 (4)
 Wilson's Storm-petrel 3 (2)
 Tahiti Petrel 10 (3)
 Wedge-tailed Shearwater 13 (5)
 Short-tailed Shearwater 1 (1)

(*Belenois java*)
 Common Grass-blue
 (*Zizina labradus*)
 Lawson's Night Moth
 (*Eudesmeola lawsoni*)
 Snout moth sp
 (*Etiella* sp)

NON-BIRDS

Tailed Emperor Butterfly
 (*Charaxes sempronius*)
 Blue Tiger Butterfly
 (*Tirumala hamata*)

Common Glider Dragonfly
 (*Tramea loewii*)
 Olive-headed Sea Snake
 (*Hydrophis major*)
 Requiem Shark sp
 (*Carcharhinus* sp)
 Common Bottlenose Dolphin
 (*Tursiops truncatus*)



*An unidentified Carcharhinus shark, with the blunt dorsal fin perhaps suggesting Silky Shark *C. falciformis*. Photo by Richard Fuller.*