

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 18th April 2021

After poor weather forced the cancellation of our 4th April trip in what would have been outstanding conditions for seabirding, we were rather fortunate to secure a replacement date so soon, and even more fortunate that the weather was again favourable for seabirds, with a 15-20 knot southerly. There was a 2.2 m swell forecast as well, so we were in for a bumpy ride! Thus it was with a combination of excitement and some trepidation that we set off on time at 0630.

We motored slowly down the river, getting good views of an adult White-bellied sea-Eagle and a couple of Ospreys riverside. The weather seemed rather calm, although things began to get a little bumpy as we cleared the seaway and struck a course to the ESE. Onboard, our burley consisted of a range of fish and prawns, chicken mince, tuna oil and several tins of tuna cat food.

Just beyond the seaway was a group of about 180 terns, and although most were very distant, they seemed to be almost all Common Terns, with about 10 White-winged Black Terns mixed in. There were probably some other species there, but most birds were



Grey-faced Petrel, showing rather brownish plumage overall, extensive grey around face, and absence of any frosting on upperparts that help distinguish it from Providence Petrel. Photograph by Ged Tranter.



White-faced Storm-petrel, the star bird of the day, and scarce this far north in Australia. This bird is in wing moult. Photo by Richard Fuller.

too far off for safe ID. Birds on the first part of the journey out to the shelf were small numbers of Hutton's Shearwaters, and a couple of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

Encouragingly, the first Providence Petrels appeared well before the shelf, while still in Sunshine Coast waters at 0830, and a storm-petrel was briefly glimpsed but not viewed well enough for identification. Soon after we crossed into Brisbane waters, a browner *Pterodroma* appeared, with extensive grey around the face, all dark plumage, including underwings which showed only a slight paler area on the primaries—a Grey-faced Petrel! Soon after, a ghostly white bird appeared in flight, and after some initial confusion about its identity, its large black eye with sharp, up-turned bill was apparent in Stephen Hey's photographs—a splendid White Tern!

White Tern is restricted as breeding species in eastern Australia to Lord Howe and Norfolk Island, and this bird is presumably a post-breeding straggler from one of those colonies.

Another trio of Providence Petrels and a Brown Booby provided something to look at as we neared the shelf, and we eventually cut the engines over about 130m of water. Although we were short of the shelf break, we had made relatively slow progress in the rough conditions, and didn't want to lose too much time by pressing on further. Our drift carried us due south at about 2km per hour in the broiling sea.

We began deploying burley, the lion's share of which was kindly prepared by Kye Turnbull—enormous thanks Kye! Providence Petrels began appearing almost straight away, and as soon as the cat food started to be dispensed, a continuous stream of Wilson's Storm-petrels materialised. Eventually the shout went up for a White-faced Storm-petrel, a magnificent grey and white storm petrel with a black bandit mask and white supercilium. It hung around for a while allowing for some pho-

tos, and delighted the crowd. This is a scarce species this far north in Australia, with the last birds on a Sunshine Coast pelagic being seen in 2016. White-faced Storm-petrels breed during the summer on small islands off southern Australia, and winter well offshore in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These birds are presumably engaging in post-breeding dispersal, and it was wonderful to watch them doing their trademark trampolining on the sea surface with both feet—magical!

Presently, a Flesh-footed Shearwater sidled in and spent quite a while sat on the sea off the stern. Wilson's Storm-petrels continued to stream past, and although another couple of White-faced Storm-petrels appeared, those straining to pick out a third species of storm-petrel were to be disappointed.

New Providence Petrels kept appearing and giving reasonably close passes of the boat, and eventually another Grey-faced Petrel showed up, allowing for some nice photos. Time was ticking on, and as the clock approached 1230, it was time to restart the engines and begin the journey back. The sea was still rather rough, so not the most pleasant journey, and relatively uneventful birdwise, with the highlight being a Common Noddy just before we left Brisbane waters.

Notably absent were Tahiti Petrels, usually a mainstay of these trips. Cetaceans were represented only by a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins not far out of the seaway, perhaps not surprising given the rough conditions.

Overall, this was a good trip, with the White-faced Storm-petrels, Grey-faced Petrels and White Tern being particularly notable. Despite the rough conditions, a good time was had by all. We have three remaining trips in 2021, on 11th July, 31st October (extended 12-hour trip into deeper water beyond the shelf), and



Flesh-footed Shearwater, photograph by Ged Tranter.

14th November. Contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au if you are interested in joining any of the trips.

Report by Richard Fuller

PARTICIPANTS: Eric Anderson, Louis Backstrom, Detlef Davies, Michael Dawson, Richard Fuller, Stephen Hey, Leonie Huijser, Tim Kastle, Wayne Kroll, Helen Leonard, Peter Leonard, Braden McDonald, James Martin, Barry McGovern, Stephen Murray, John O'Shea, Nancy Pachana, Debbie Quirk, Gary Quirk, Ged Tranter, Kye Turnbull, Jamie Walker, Brad Woodworth.

SPECIES: Total (max. at once)

- Brown Booby 1 (1)
- Common Noddy 1 (1)
- White Tern 1 (1)
- Common Tern 160 (160)
- Crested Tern 16 (6)
- White-winged Tern 10 (10)
- Sooty Tern 1 (1)
- Storm-petrel sp 1 (1)
- White-faced Storm-petrel 3 (2)
- Wilson's Storm-petrel 47 (23)
- Providence Petrel 27 (10)
- Grey-faced Petrel 2 (1)
- Flesh-footed Shearwater 3 (2)
- Wedge-tailed Shearwater 4 (1)
- Hutton's Shearwater 16 (8)
- Hutton's / Fluttering Shearwater 7 (2)

NON-BIRDS

- Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)



Providence Petrel, showing conspicuous double white flash on underwing. Photo by Ged Tranter.