

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 15th August 2021

“Day after day, day after day,
we stuck nor breath nor motion
As idle as a painted ship upon a
painted ocean;

Water, water everywhere and
all the boards did shrink
Water, water everywhere nor any
drop to drink.”

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
**The Rime of the Ancient Mari-
ner**

Unlike the ancient mariner, we had an engine to propel our vessel in the extremely calm conditions that dominated on 15th August off south-east Queensland. The birds of course have only their wings, and many seabirds have long and narrow wings, meaning they need wind to provide the necessary lift for sustained periods of flight. As we assembled at the jetty in the early morning, we knew our trip was going to be challenging from a birding perspective. Thus it was with a degree of resignation that we set off a few minutes early at 0620.

We motored slowly down the river, getting good views of a couple of Ospreys riverside. Inshore there were light winds blowing. We cas-



There were plenty of Humpback Whales on show during the trip. This one is sporting two species of barnacle on its tail—Coronula diadema along the tail edges, and Conchoderma auritum on the tips. Photograph by Richard Fuller.



Shy Albatross, the star bird of the day, and very rare in Queensland. Photo by Braden McDonald.

ually began to scan through the usual birds appearing just offshore (the occasional Australasian Gannet, Crested Terns, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters). Noticing another distant “gannet” at about 0725, Kye suddenly exclaimed that the bird was an albatross! It was very distant, and although airborne, was labouring a little in flight. Hurried inspection of camera shots revealed that the bird was a Shy Albatross, which had apparently been present in these near coastal waters since at least yesterday. This is a very scarce species in Queensland, with just a handful of records in the last decade, and follows on the heels of an adult bird also on the Sunshine Coast pelagic on 3rd June 2018. We excitedly asked the skipper to pilot the boat towards where the bird had been, but despite the occasional glimpse we couldn't get back onto the bird, which was unfortunate for those on board that hadn't

managed to see it. Eventually we had to give up the search without relocating the bird, and we continued on our way towards the continental shelf.

Onboard, our burley consisted of a range of fish and prawns, chicken mince, tuna oil and several tins of tuna cat food.

Birds on the remainder of the outward journey settled into rather frequent appearances of Hutton's Shearwaters, including many birds that were only assigned to Hutton's / Fluttering because of brief views from the fast-moving vessel. At least a couple of Fluttering Shearwaters were eventually seen in with the Hutton's.

Depressingly, what little wind there was dropped even further, and as we neared the shelf, the sea took on a glassy appearance. This did mean that we got photographs of a couple of bottle-nosed dolphin-sized cetaceans that we might otherwise have missed. After much discussion on online ID forums, the best identification appears to be probable Pygmy Killer Whales, which is exciting! After we cut the engine over the shelf, all was very quiet, and the sea-

scape took on a rather eerily beautiful quality.

We half-heartedly began deploying burley, but we knew it was going to be a lost cause. With so little wind, the seabirds just can't stay airborne for long, and the scent of the burley wasn't being transported any appreciable distance from the boat. In the first hour of the drift, the only deep pelagic seabird we had was a single Providence Petrel. By far the biggest surprise came in the form of a lone Eastern Curlew winging its way south, presumably on the final leg of its migration. This was a fairly special thing to see, and no-one on board could recall seeing one previously this far out over the ocean.

We decided to give up after an hour of drifting, and motored back towards the shore, with the idea of doing another drift further in, perhaps in the area where we'd seen the Shy Albatross earlier. On the way, a group of 5 Wilson's Storm-petrels briefly detained us, and a couple of decent rafts of Hutton's Shearwater totalled over 200 birds, with at least one Fluttering Shearwater hiding in them. Just before 2pm we began drifting at the spot where we had seen the Shy Albatross in the morning, but there was to be no further sign of it, and there were no other birds of note on the return journey, save for a white phase Eastern Reef Egret on the riverbank as we entered the seaway.

Overall, this was a disappointing trip, severely hampered by the doldrums, offset only by the admittedly rather rare Shy Albatross and the probable Pygmy Killer Whales. At least the calm weather made for a very pleasant ride, and it was nice to spend some time on the ocean catching up with each other's news. We have two remaining trips in 2021, on 31st October (an extended 12-hour trip into deeper water beyond the shelf), and 14th November. Both trips are currently full, but contact Richard Fuller on r.fuller@uq.edu.au



Hutton's Shearwater, photograph by Ged Tranter. Over 350 were logged on the trip. Note the dark axillary triangle, dark underwing primary coverts, dusky flanks and dark breast.

if you are interested in joining the waiting list for either trip.

Report by Richard Fuller

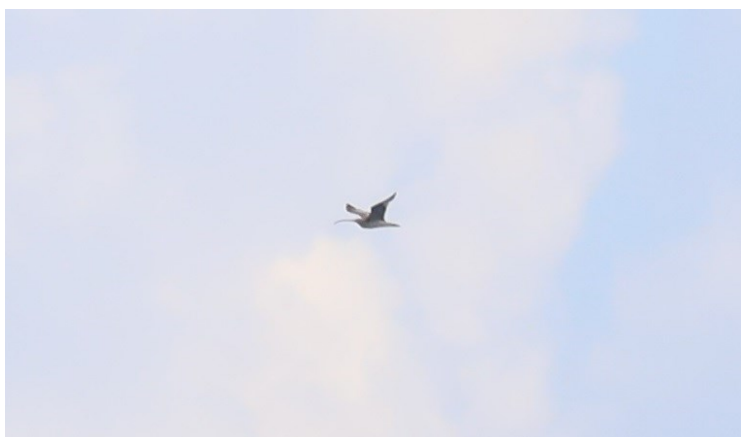
PARTICIPANTS: Louis Backstrom, Joseph Douglas, Cécile Espigolé, Scott Fox, Rick Franks, Richard Fuller, Brandon Hewitt, Angus Innes, Tim Kastle, Wayne Kroll, Helen Leonard, Richard Maarschall, James Martin, Braden McDonald, Leander Mitchell, John O'Shea, Nancy Pachana, Dan Pagotto, Carolyn Scott, Richard Simmonds, Ged Tranter, Kye Turnbull, Jamie Walker.

SPECIES: Total (max. at once)

Shy Albatross 1 (1)
Australasian Gannet 8 (4)
Eastern Curlew 1 (1)
Crested Tern 77 (37)
Wilson's Storm-petrel 7 (5)
Providence Petrel 3 (2)
Wedge-tailed Shearwater 84 (60)
Hutton's Shearwater 249 (220)
Fluttering Shearwater 3 (2)
Hutton's / Fluttering Shearwater 35 (15)

NON-BIRDS

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)
Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
Pygmy Killer Whale (*Feresa attenuata*) [probable]



Eastern Curlew on its southward migration over the continental shelf. Photo by Cécile Espigolé.