

Sunshine Coast Pelagic Report, 3rd April 2022

Our Sunshine Coast pelagic trips have thus far been of 9 hours' duration, which gets us just to the edge of the shelf break, where we usually drift while deploying burley in about 300m depth of water. We wanted to try getting further out into deeper water, with the idea of getting to the east of the "shadow" cast by Mulgumpin and Minjerribah. This involved another 10 nautical miles of steaming, and so we conceived the idea of a 12-hour trip to enable this to happen. Two such trips were scheduled this year by way of an experiment: on 3rd April and on 23rd October.

With a strong southerly blow in the week ahead of the trip, we were a little crestfallen to see the forecast drop to very light winds on the day of our trip, but with a distinct easterly component still in the wind, had high hopes for the day. The sense of expectation was heightened by our earlier in-the-dark start at 0530.

We motored down the Mooloolo River from our mooring, and crossed the bar into a rather easy-going ocean. The easterly winds were about 8 knots and there was a swell of around 2 metres, but the



A Flesh-footed Shearwater followed us out beyond the shelf break, and we logged 21 sightings of the species during the trip. Photograph by Richard Fuller.



White-bellied Storm-petrel, the star bird of the day. Very rare away from their breeding grounds on Lord Howe Island. Photo by Raja Stephenson.

long period of the swell meant the journey was going to be comfortable, and more importantly for our birding prospects, fast! Our speed was further aided by engineering works on the boat, which had given the propellor increased torque, and the dedication of skipper Zoe, meaning we could achieve 16-18 knots.

A quick surprise showed up not far offshore in the form of a Pomarine Jaeger, although it was too quick for photos and not seen by all on board. A few White-winged Black Terns and Common Terns were in the same area. Otherwise, the first part of the outward journey was reasonably quiet, with just occasional Wedge-tailed Shearwaters breaking the horizon. Presently, someone spied a couple of Wilson's Storm-petrels, which from a boat travelling at 18 knots is an achievement in itself, and much further in-shore than we nor-

mally see them. A group of Hutton's Shearwater busily shuffled by. The first Tahiti Petrel of the day appeared well before the shelf break, serving to raise our hopes.

About 0750, a shout went up for Providence Petrel, and it quickly became apparent there were two birds, one of which showed rather plain underwings and extensive pale on the face—a Grey-faced Petrel! This species is rather scarce on the Sunshine Coast trips, and we were very pleased with this. A New Zealand breeder, Grey-faced Petrels can be seen off SE Australia year-round, but become progressively scarcer into Qld.

We dragged a mesh bag containing fish frames and dripping tuna oil behind the boat, in short order prompting a Flesh-footed Shearwater to follow us, occasionally coming down to take fish scraps that we additionally offered. As we crossed the shelf break and passed our usual area for drifting, the Fleshie was still with us, and further Tahiti Petrels and Providence Petrels appeared. A distant group of 7 Short-tailed Shearwaters was seen by some on board.

Well ahead of our expectations, we arrived at our target destination in about 2,000m of water at 0912. The new propellor, and Zoe's single-minded mission to get us there in good time paid dividends! Much splashing in the water ahead alerted us to the presence of a large number of cetaceans. Roughly dolphin-sized, their recurved black dorsal fin and black coloration immediately made us suspect blackfish, and after a while we started to get reasonable views of many animals, which were rather close to the boat by now. Raja Stephenson and Nikolas Haass nailed down the identification while we watched on, entranced by the spectacle. The white lips, dark triangular mask on the head and extensive cape, dipping well below the dorsal ruled out the more uniformly-colored Pygmy Killer Whale, and the rather triangular head shape distinguished them from False Killer Whale. The herd contained roughly 300 animals, and they gave continuous views for 15 minutes or more—magical stuff!

Once we recovered from the mammal excitement, we began drifting and deploying burley, a mix of fish and prawn bits, tuna cat food, chicken mince and tuna oil. Small numbers of Providence Petrels, Tahiti Petrels and a Flesh-footed Shearwater were in attendance, and were soon joined by a couple of Wilson's Storm-petrels. Then a shout went up from Louis Backstrom about a third Storm-petrel approaching, which we quickly realised was a *Fregetta* species. Quickly zeroing in on the bird, we clocked its white underparts, extensive clean white in the underwings, and lack of foot projection beyond the tail. We got good views of the breast band, which was concave-edge, had no central black notch protruding, and only extended a little way in front of the line of the leading edge of the wing. All these characters taken together indicated that we were looking at a WHITE-BELLIED STORM-PETREL, a very special treat indeed!



Melon-headed Whale, photographed by Raja Stephenson. A herd of over 300 animals gave us a magical show in 2km of water beyond the shelf break.

With scattered breeding populations in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, the White-bellied Storm-petrel is rarely encountered at sea, with SE QLD being one of the most reliable locations in the world to see this species on regular pelagic trips. The nearest breeding colonies are at Lord Howe Island, and wandering birds are recorded scarcely along the E coast of mainland Australia.

Further Wilson's Storm-petrels, Tahiti Petrels and Flesh-footed Shearwaters continued to join us, and presently a magnificent White Tern passed the boat, reasonably close by, allowing appreciation of its dagger-like,

upturned bill and beady black eye. A breeding species of Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island, this beautiful species is scarce but regular on our trips. Wilson's Storm-petrels continued to appear, but despite our efforts we could not pick out a third species of storm-petrel (our hopes were up for New Caledonian Storm-petrel). Around 11:30 we decided to motor slowly up the slick to see if anything was lingering there, and we bumped into another Grey-faced Petrel, which showed well but fairly briefly. Fully six Flesh-footed Shearwaters were about, making this trip one of the best in recent times for this species off the Sunshine Coast.



A magnificent Common Noddy flew close past the boat, and landed on the water. Photograph by Raja Stephenson.

We headed north-east for about 6 nautical miles and began drifting again. Immediately the sharp-eyed Kye Turnbull picked up a pale-phase Kermadec Petrel which shot past the bow and wasn't seen by all. However, a bit later a lovely dark phase bird passed the boat much closer and was enjoyed by all. This species is rare off the Sunshine Coast, despite being frequently seen off the Gold Coast, perhaps reflecting a biogeographic divide, and perhaps also the fact we weren't previously heading this far offshore. Eventually at 1pm we started the journey back, with time in the bank to stop if needed on the way. We just added small numbers of the same set of species for much of the journey back, although inshore we had brief looks at two Streaked Shearwaters, and the tern flock just off Mooloolaba had several very smart White-winged Black Terns present.

We motored back up the Mooloolah River very happy with a brilliant day on the sea. We have additional trips this year on 12th Jun, 17th Jul, 14th Aug, 23rd Oct, 13th Nov. The trips are regular 9-hour journeys, with the exception of 23rd Oct, which is an extended 12-hour trip. Contact me on r.fuller@uq.edu.au to book.

Report by Richard Fuller

PARTICIPANTS: Louis Backstrom, Luke Bennett, Chris Corben, Michael Dawson, Rick Franks, Richard Fuller, Nikolas Haass, Justine Hausheer, Stephen Hey, Tim Kastle, Helen Leonard, James Martin, Leander Mitchell, Nik Mulconray, John O'Shea, Roland Odsey, Nancy Pachana, Wendy Powe, Greg Roberts, Karen Rose, Raja Stephenson, Kye Turnbull.

SPECIES: Total (max. at once)

Red-footed Booby 1 (1)
 Pomarine Jaeger 1 (1)
 Arctic Jaeger 1 (1)
 Common Noddy 1 (1)
 White Tern 1 (1)
 Little Tern 2 (2)
 Common Tern 150 (120)



A dark phase Kermadec Petrel flew close past the boat, just after a more distant pale phase bird. Photograph by Kye Turnbull.

Crested Tern 4 (1)
 White-winged Black Tern 12 (7)
 White-bellied Storm-petrel 1 (1)
 Wilson's Storm-petrel 54 (17)
 Providence Petrel 16 (8)
 Grey-faced Petrel 2 (1)
 Kermadec Petrel 2 (1)
 Tahiti Petrel 16 (5)
 Flesh-footed Shearwater 21 (6)
 Wedge-tailed Shearwater 30 (9)
 Short-tailed Shearwater 8 (7)
 Streaked Shearwater 2 (1)
 Hutton's Shearwater 22 (12)

NON-BIRDS

Risso's Dolphin (*Grampus griseus*)
 Melon-headed Whale (*Peponocephala electra*)
 Spotted Oceanic Triggerfish (*Canthidermis maculata*)

See eBird Trip report at <https://ebird.org/australia/tripreport/46352>



An active group of Risso's Dolphins showed well on the way back towards Mooloolaba. Photo by Raja Stephenson.