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# Sea Swallow

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The Society was formed in 1946 to provide a forum for the exchange of information on seabirds, and land birds at sea, by members for whom birdwatching is a spare time recreation and hobby. It also aims to coordinate the efforts of individual members using standardised recording methods so that observations can be of value to the professional ornithologist. In addition to the promotion of observations afloat, the RNBWS organises fieldwork and expeditions, often in cooperation with the Army and RAF Ornithological Societies.

The Royal Naval Birdwatching Society is the only organisation in the world which collects, collates and publishes data on seabirds and landbirds at sea. Membership is open to all those, regardless of nationality, who share a common interest in birds at sea. Instructions for joining can be found on the Society website [www.rnbsw.org.uk](http://www.rnbsw.org.uk) or by application to the Secretary.

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**Material for publication** in *Sea Swallow* should be sent to the editor. Ideally submissions should be in MS Word or rtf format, but other formats are acceptable. Graphics should be jpeg or tiff. Accompanying photographs sent electronically should always be the original camera files, and not cropped in any way. Contributions are welcome at any time, but if for inclusion in the next edition should reach the editor by 30 July.

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# Chairman's Foreword

by Rear Admiral Martin Alabaster

History will record 2020 as the year of the Corona virus, and the pandemic affected RNBWS and *Sea Swallow* as it did pretty well everything else. The planned final year of the Seabird Survey had to be put off, the Madeira expedition didn't happen, and other planned events - the AGM, field trips, and meetings, didn't take place. But much did happen, as we see in these pages. Simon Cook was afloat off Antarctica when the crisis arose and he records the difficulties and uncertainties of a ship caught at sea with nowhere to go. Frank Zino continued his Zino's Petrel conservation activity - outside his vital doctoring work I might add - and has written a fine history of the whole project; and though RNBWS was unable to send out a team this year we did have a part to play, for we sent £500 to pay for climbers to do vital conservation work on the crags. Nigel Hacking records here a memorable trip from New Zealand to Japan, while John Holmes took part in a birding yacht voyage to the Robinson Crusoe Islands off Chile. Meanwhile, Colin Richardson, once our man in the Gulf and for some years now our Cyprus rep, updates us with his sea watch observations over the past five years. Closer to home, Arctic Skuas are in the spotlight, and their UK decline is featured in two articles.



**Plate 1.** Dr WRP Bourne, RNBWS Emeritus Seabird Adviser, at ninety. © S Bourne

In 2018 the Society gave a David Simpson Scholarship grant to Dr Rachael Orben to do research on Black-browed Albatross, and I am pleased to say that she has duly reported on her winter work on Bird Island, off West Falkland. Also pleasing are the report from HMS *Scott*, and several short articles on the difficulties of birdwatching when a warship is at a high state of readiness.

On the minus side, I note the passing of former RFA Radio Officer Bill Curtis. He was a real RNBWS and *Sea Swallow* stalwart, and kept in touch pretty well until the end. However, I also note that the greatest contributor of all to the Society and the magazine, Dr WRPB Bourne - another RFA man incidentally - celebrated his ninetieth birthday during the year, and that is a happy note on which to end.

**Martin Alabaster**

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# The Freira Conservation Project - the history of how it came about and some information on *Pterodroma madeira*, Zino's Petrel

by Dr Frank Zino & Manuel Biscoito

(Photographs by F Zino)

Zino's Petrel, *Pterodroma madeira*, is an endemic species breeding in the central massif of the island of Madeira between Pico do Areeiro and Pico Ruivo. It comes to shore in March and is gone by the end of October. It is estimated that there may be some 80 breeding pairs in total, which would indicate a total world population of about 300–350 birds if one includes non-breeders. IUCN considers it a threatened species.

Palaentological studies indicate that Zino's Petrel was once common on Madeira and Porto Santo and there is even one record from the nearby Desertas islands. The last record from Porto Santo was by John J Dalgleish in 1889, and we can only conclude that it has become extinct on that group of islands, almost certainly due to human intervention.

Fossils from the caves at São Vicente demonstrate that the species was once well spread throughout the island of Madeira. No doubt, the limited breeding ground now only found high up on the central massif of the island has come about as a direct result of human presence and their introduced animals: goats, dogs, cats and rats.

Recent genetic studies show that of the three *Pterodromas* found in the Northeast Atlantic, (*Pterodroma madeira*, *P. feae* and *P. deserta*), *Pterodroma madeira* is the oldest. It migrated South from Madeira to Cape Verde where it became isolated to form *Pterodroma feae*. This new population then migrated North to Bugio (Desertas) and again became isolated to form *Pterodroma deserta*.



**Plates 2–3. (left)** Shepherds at Arieiro, 8th May 1966. **(right)** The scene my father found on Pico do Areeiro. Six Zino's Petrels had been taken from their nests, together with their eggs.

Zino's Petrel, as it is now named, *Pterodroma madeira*, was first handled in 1903 by Father Ernesto Schmitz, when he was brought birds from the Serras de Santo António on Madeira. Schmitz was the rector of the Seminary, and became a naturalist and collector, acquiring great experience in ornithology. He mistakenly identified the birds that had been brought to him as *Oestrellata feae*, as it was then known, which he knew nested on Bugio in the Desertas, having collected various specimens from there. It was not until 1932 that Gregory M Mathews described the birds brought to Schmitz in 1903 as a subspecies of *Pterodroma mollis*, naming it *Pterodroma mollis madeira*. The Bugio bird he renamed *Pterodroma mollis deserta*, with the nominal subspecies *Pterodroma mollis mollis* being restricted to the Southern Oceans.

Ernesto Schmitz left Madeira for the Holy Land in 1908 and no more was heard about Zino's Petrel, to the extent that by the 1950s it was considered to have become extinct.

In 1963, Günther (Jerry) Maul, at the time Director of the Funchal Natural History Museum, organised a multidisciplinary expedition to the Selvagem Islands. On that expedition were Christian Jouanin and Francis Roux from the Department of Ornithology of the Paris Museum of Natural History; also on the expedition were Paul Alexander Zino (Alec) and his son Francis Zino (Frank). During the expedition the French ornithologists awaked the interest of both Alec and Frank in the ornithology of the Madeira Archipelago.

During the following years, the Zinos (father and son) together with their French friends carried out a series of ornithological studies on the Madeira archipelago, mostly on the seabird population. On board Alec's yacht *Yam Seng* they covered the islands of the archipelago and offshore islets, with several trips to Bugio to study the Bugio's petrel, then known as Fea's Petrel, *Pterodroma feae*. Access to Bugio is very difficult and involves climbing a 380m cliff along a very dubious path. Even so Alec managed to carry up his Grundig tape recorder, weighing seven kilos, and he made excellent recordings of Bugio's Petrel.



Plate 4. March 1987. As the birds arrive, the team set off to put out rat poison boxes. Frank Zino at left.



**Plate 5.** Manuel Boscoitto using the Gastroscope.

During the 1967 and 1968 breeding seasons the Zinos and their French friends made various night visits to the mountains round Curral das Freiras, listening for *Pterodroma* calls. None were heard. The idea that the *Pterodromas* of Madeira had become extinct was again raised, but Jerry Maul was convinced that a remnant population remained, as in 1940 and 1951 two juvenile Zino's Petrels had been found, attracted to the lights of Funchal, and been taken to the Funchal Natural History Museum.

Alec Zino then had a theory; if a man of Schmitz's experience, with the birds from Madeira in hand, had not distinguished them from *P. feae*, then maybe they were not only very similar, but their calls might also be similar. With this in mind he started to interview shepherds from the area round Curral das Freiras, as well as those who had grazing stock round Pico do Areeiro. Finally, he found a shepherd called Lucas, who lived in Curral das Freiras, who identified the sound as the calls of the souls of shepherds who had died in the mountains!

### **Zino's Petrel breeding grounds discovered**

Lucas was able to identify the area where he had heard his 'souls' at the base of Pico do Cidrão. In April 1969, Jerry Maul, Alec Zino and Frank Zino drove up to Pico Areeiro and walked down the path to below Pico do Cidrão and managed to hear the long sought after sound. *Pterodroma madeira* was NOT extinct, and the breeding grounds had been found - a great advance in the investigation.

From 1969 to the early 1980s regular visits were made to the breeding area of the *Pterodromas* round Pico do Areeiro, but there being no protective legislation in force and having lost to egg-stealers and species collectors a large percentage of a species that was previously thought to be extinct, it was decided not to publish the findings for fear that other collectors might appear, putting the species under even more threat.

During the early 1980s there was a certain interest from foreign ornithologists in work on the birds of Madeira. They had become aware of the work already done with the *Pterodromas* and wanted to work with them, claiming to have found new colonies, which the Zinos and friends knew did not exist because since the discovery



Plate 6 a. Manga Grande, rat predation. The enemy b. rats and c. cats.

they had searched the central mountain massif very carefully. This led to a group of people meeting on a regular basis to discuss problems. The group was made up of Alec Zino, Frank Zino, Manuel Biscoito (Natural History Museum), Henrique Costa Neves (Forestry Department), Donato Caires, Miguel Moreira, Ted Gerrard and Elizabeth (Buffy) Zino (wife of Frank). This embryonic group was to become the *Projecto de Conservação da Freira - FCP* (Freira Conservation Project).

In 1984 the team started regular night visits to the breeding grounds as well as to the known breeding ledges. Their climbing equipment was totally inadequate for the dangerous work and in retrospect it is fortunate that there were no accidents. The presence of rats on the breeding ledges was confirmed and rat poison put down.

In 1985, Frank Zino and Henrique Costa Neves were lowered onto the breeding ledge from which the birds had been taken in 1969. An egg eaten by rats was discovered, but no signs of successful breeding in any of the burrows. Since the available climbing gear was so dangerous, the International Council for Bird Protection (ICBP) was contacted, Frank became their local representative (as well as for the RSPB), and they provided much improved climbing gear. This was a great advance in safety and capability. Rat poison was put down on the breeding ledges.

On 12 June 1986, Frank Zino and Manuel Biscoito caught a Zino's Petrel in a net at night, below Pico do Areeiro. It weighed 185 grams and was ringed with ring No. J01150. It was the first ring ever applied to a Zino's Petrel.

Towards the end of that breeding season the nests were visited, a chick partially eaten by rats was found on the Main Ledge, and again there had been no successful breeding because of rat predation. All the rat poison put down had been eaten, but with seemingly little benefit.

Earlier that year, Andy Swash from ADAS (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, U.K.) came to Madeira, and in the course of his visit met Frank and Buffy Zino, discussed the rat problem in Madeira, and this led to the recruitment of Dr Alan Buckle, a rat clearance expert who then worked for ICI Public Health.

Also in that year, 1986, Alec and Frank Zino published a scientific paper on the Pterodromas of the Archipelago in the *Boletim do Museu Municipal do Funchal*.

### **The start of turning the embryonic FCP into an official organisation**

By the end of 1986 Alan Buckle and Andy Swash had worked out a plan for trying to control rats in the breeding area of *Pterodroma madeira*. This consisted of a *cordon sanitaire* of boxes containing rodenticide round the breeding ledges. The boxes were specially designed to avoid poisoning of non-target fauna, or contamination of water. After much planning and correspondence, they visited Madeira for a week in January 1987, and were amazed at the number of rats they managed to trap. On return to the UK they presented their plan to ICI, who approved the plan and were extremely generous, for not only did they provide expertise, they funded the provision of much mountain kit plus all the rodenticide to be used, Klerat® (Brodifacoum). For bureaucratic reasons ICBP had to be involved in the project and Frank Zino was nominated to be the representative in Portugal. It was also necessary to form an official body to run things in Madeira and to receive the rodenticide officially. The original ad hoc group now became the Freira Conservation Project - FCP.

For official purposes the FCP was made up of the ICPB Representative, Frank Zino; the representative of the Funchal Natural History Museum (MMF), Manuel J. Biscoito; the representative of the Natural Park of Madeira (PNM), Henrique Costa Neves, with Paul Alexander Zino as President, as well as the members who had worked together in the years before.

At the start of the 1987 breeding season all the bait boxes were in place. Each had an ID number and boxes were visited regularly by members of the FCP to check rat takes. This work continued all the way through to 2004 when the PNM took over the monitoring, and continues to this day, now as IFCN - Instituto das Florestas e Conservação da Natureza (Madeira Forest and Nature Conservation Institute). It is the longest running project with rats at world level.



**Plates 7–8. (left)** A team preparing to go down to Main Ledge. **(right)** Frank Zino going down to Small ledge, with Herique Costa Neves waiting to pull him sideways onto the ledge.

## First juvenile ringed and fledged

In 1987, the FCP borrowed a night vision sight from Pilkington (NSG Group), with the aim of trying to find new nests, and during the night of 22 June a bird was seen climbing out of the bushes onto a ledge. This proved to be another breeding ledge, now called the 1987 Ledge, and on 2 September 1987 Henrique Costa Neves was lowered onto it and found a juvenile *Pterodroma madeira*. This was weighed, measured and ringed. It weighed 340g, almost double the normal adult weight! It was fitted with ring number J001137, and was the first juvenile *P. madeira* ever ringed. A visit to the nest in late October confirmed that it had fledged.

In 1988 ICI, through Alan Buckle, continued to finance the project. Work continued, and several adults were ringed by catching them in nets at night, but sadly there were no juvenile survivors.

At this point it was realised that the regular visiting of the bait boxes and the nightly vigils were becoming very hard work for amateurs working in their free time, and that year ICI agreed to finance a part time warden to work the poison boxes. João Gouveia, well known to the FCP and an ex Forestry warden in the area, was approached and agreed to do the work - a huge step forward.

ICI continued to finance the project in 1989 and in August published a paper, *Saving Europe's Rarest Bird* in their magazine *Roundel*, written by Alan Buckle and Frank Zino. In August of this same year the Department of Gastroenterology at Funchal General Hospital donated a Colonoscope which had become obsolete for medical work, but was just what the FCP needed. The method of lighting was adapted by Ted Gerard and it was used to inspect the deep nests. The first success was on the Main Ledge, when Alexander Zino (son of Frank) managed to detect an incubating bird, albeit with an upside-down image! This piece of kit proved a great success and nowadays there are special scopes made for this purpose.

In 1989 and 1990 four juveniles fledged, positive results after many years of hard work, controlling rats.

In 1991, ICI Public Health continued their generous support for the project, including funds to pay students to carry out night survey work. Meanwhile, Dr Alan Buckle gave a paper at a Rat Control Conference in Oxford, citing the FCP work as an example, and the magazine *Birdwatch* published an article on the work being done by the FCP.



Plates 9–10. (left) Handing down a ringed chick. (right) Juvenile Zino's Petrel.

On 1 July 1991 a very serious problem was discovered. A cat or cats had managed to get onto the 1987 ledge and kill ten adult birds - about 20% of the known breeding population at the time. With the help of ICI, the FCP immediately deployed a series of cat traps. These continue to work to this day and every year cats are removed from the area. These are feral cats, abandoned by man, and their effect on bird populations on islands is well documented and horrendous.

1991 and 1992 saw four juveniles of *P. madeira* fledged, and in 1993 the number rose to eight.

### New breeding ledges discovered

Zeneca's Lisbon branch (ex ICI) continued their financial support for 1994. The Spanish Nature Conservation Institute, ICONA, lent the FCP a couple of expert climbers to help search for new nests in the Areiro area, while the Forestry Department lent the FCP a house on Pico do Cidrão for use as a base. This was a huge success with the discovery of two new breeding ledges, now named Manga dos Vómitos and Manga dos Espanhois and these ledges now have a long history of successful breeding. Five juveniles were ringed and fledged that year. 1994 also saw the first result of the ringing efforts when on 14 July J01128 was caught in the nets, having been ringed as a juvenile in Nest 1 of the Main Ledge in October 1989.

In 1995, Zeneca Lisbon again financed the project. Frank Zino went to Strasbourg to present three papers at the Council of Europe for the implementation of Action Plans for *P. madeira*, *P. deserta* (then thought to be *P. feae* and now considered a good species) and *Columba trocaz*. Meanwhile, on the island four juvenile birds were ringed and fledged, but a new threat to the birds appeared - a sheep that had managed to get onto the Manga dos Espanhois. The owners were informed and asked to remove it, but they said it was too difficult and it took a mountain specialist on ropes to chase the sheep off the ledge - but not before it had eaten all the vegetation. Fortunately, the ledge recovered and produces one to two juveniles each year.

In 1996 Zeneca Lisbon ceased financial support to the FCP and after much correspondence RSBP agreed to take this on. Fortunately, Dr Alan Buckle through Zeneca UK continued to provide all the rodenticide the project needed. The Council of Europe published the Action Plans discussed the previous year. Frank Zino, Manuel Biscoito and Borja Heredia were the authors of the Action Plans for *P. madeira* and *P. feae*. Early in



Plates 11–12. (top) Main Ledge, one year after the fire. (bottom) Main Ledge 2017. Flora regenerated after the 2010 fire.

1996 there were heavy snowfalls in Madeira, which it was hoped would help reduce the rat population in the mountains, but no, it was a bad year and only three juveniles were ringed, with several found dead and eaten by rats.

1997 was again financed by RSBP and the rodenticide given by Zeneca UK through Dr Alan Buckle. Five juveniles were ringed and fledged.

1998 was again financed by RSBP and the rodenticide provided by Zeneca UK. It was a very busy year for the Madeira Natural Park (PNM) climbers, Paulo Oliveira and Amilcar Vasconcelos, searching for new breeding areas. Sue King from the University of Manchester came to Madeira to study rats and the distribution of the flora on the breeding ledges and that December there was a two-day meeting in Funchal to discuss the problems associated with Zino's Petrel.

For the first time since 1969 there was successful breeding on the Small Ledge. A total of four juveniles fledged of which three were ringed.

In 1999 the project was again financed by RSBP with Alan Buckle providing rodenticide, as well as much useful advice on rats and how best to control them.

It was becoming evident to the FCP that a secure means of financing was needed and that it would be a good idea to try and purchase the breeding grounds, which were privately owned. An approach had been made to the majority owner in the late 80s, but had been turned down flat. Frank Zino had had several contacts with Chris Huxley of FFI - Fauna and Flora International - and after much discussion between Chris Huxley, Manuel Biscoito and Frank Zino it was decided that FCP should apply to the FFI Arcadia Fund for funding to purchase the breeding area. Manuel Biscoito and Frank Zino, with a lot of help from Chris Huxley, drew up and presented a financial request to the Arcadia Fund, which was eventually successful. Further discussions took place and it was suggested that, whilst guaranteeing the full amount, the Arcadia would officially release only half and that the team should apply to the European Union for the other half. In October 1999 a workshop was held in Funchal with various entities present to discuss how best to go about a LIFE application to the European Union. The project was of such dimensions that it was decided that the application should be made by PNM as the FCP did not have capacity for such a project. Paulo Oliveira was given the very difficult job of making the application.



**Plates 13–14.** (left) Ringing, Manga Grande. (right) Adult male and female taken from the nest in early April when the birds are cleaning their nest. This is the best time to handle them, to check rings, take blood samples and collect lice.

In 1999 nine juveniles were ringed, with another six fledged, but without being ringed.

In 2000 RSPB withdrew its financial support and after much correspondence, Dr Petra Deimer managed to get funds from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Meanwhile, Dr Alan Buckle continued to provide the project with free rodenticide, now coming from Syngenta.

### **New colony discovered**

In 2000 the FCP was contacted by Nick Carlile who had won a Churchill Scholarship to work with *Pterodromas*. Whilst in Madeira he took part in the daytime work, and also spent a lot of time working at night with João Nunes, the FCP 'night warden'. Their job was to try and locate any possible new breeding colonies in the Areeiro region. Many years before, Vincent Bretagnolle had said he felt that there was a colony on Pico das Torres and so they were asked to concentrate on that area. They eventually found an area on the Northeast of Pico das Torres on which they felt there was a breeding colony. This information was passed to the PNM climbers, who with the help of shepherds in the area found a route to the area and confirmed a breeding colony, thenceforward known as Manga LIFE.

Nick published his Churchill Scholarship work in 2003 in *Marine Ornithology* with Frank Zino as a co-author, while Frank Zino, Manuel Biscoito and Paulo Oliveira contributed articles on *Important Bird Areas in Europe: Priority sites for conservation*, in *BirdLife International*.

The results for 2000 were encouraging, with nine juveniles ringed and fledged, with another 16 fledged but unringed.

2001 continued with the same financial support and provision of rodenticide. Birds results were poor that year - only three fledged and ringed - but there was other progress. Following up an idea of Manuel Biscoito and Frank Zino the FCP bought PIT tags to be attached to the bird rings, which with the interrogators placed in the entrance to the burrow, made it possible to monitor the comings and goings of individual birds.

That March there was a Symposium on Islands and Ecosystems in Funchal. Paulo Oliveira and Frank Zino presented a joint paper and Manuel Biscoito and Frank Zino presented a poster on the comparative biometrics of *P. feae* and *P. madeira*. Frank Zino and others also published a paper in *Oryx* entitled *Conservation of Zino's Petrel, Pterodroma madeira, in the Archipelago of Madeira*.

### **NGO established for conservation**

In order to be able to receive the funding from the Arcadia Fund, the FCP could no longer remain an informal organisation and had to become an official NGO dealing with the conservation of *P. madeira*, and the conservation of wildlife, so from 16 July 2001 it became known as: "Freiras - Associação para a Conservação e Protecção da Natureza".

In 2002 and 2003 the FCP was financed through the PNM with funds received from their LIFE Project while Alan Buckle continued to provide rodenticide through Syngenta. However, in 2003, a new problem arose: the building of a Military Radar on the top of Pico Areeiro. The FCP, through Manuel Biscoito and Frank Zino, wrote a document which drew attention to the possible problems that this structure might have, including the environmental impact. The FCP also requested that building works be carried out during the non-breeding season and that special care be taken

with the lighting. This advice was followed to the letter, for which they deserve due thanks, as building at Areeiro in winter is not an easy task!

In April 2003 Dr. Paulo Oliveira from the PNM, with his excellent mountaineering skills, carried out the very difficult work needed to set up the monitoring system for the PITs. The nests on the Main Ledge were visited in April, when the birds were cleaning out their nests, and PIT tags applied to two pairs of birds. Data was collected weekly, but this also involved carrying to the site a large car battery, which was hard work. At a later stage a solar panel was employed to produce the necessary energy.

At last, fabulous results! 2003 was a great year for juvenile fledglings. Eighteen were ringed on the old ledges and a further two on the Manga LIFE.

The Portuguese Ministry of Defence, who had appreciated the report they had received from the FCP, provided finance for 2004. In January Frank Zino gave a talk at the British Ornithologists' Club about the rediscovery of Zino's Petrel, followed by a talk by Alan Buckle on the control of rats, with special reference to the work being carried out in Madeira. The birds with PIT tags returned to their nest and data started to be downloaded. In August the money from the Arcadia Fund arrived, specifically to pay off owners of land in the Montado do Areeiro, whose land had been expropriated.

Between the breeding seasons of 2007 and 2010 dataloggers, bought from the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge (BAS), were placed on 14 adult birds. Over the years all birds handled had had a blood sample taken, as well as measurements of all the biometrics and searching for lice. The bloods were used to sex the birds and as a DNA database, while lice were sent to Dr. Ricardo Palma in New Zealand for identification, contributing to an extensive paper published in *Zootaxa* in 2011. This described a new species to science found on *P. madeira*.

Ruth Brown was a PhD student at the time and was given the blood samples, together with samples of bloods taken from Fea's Petrel on Bugio. In 2008 a paper was published in *IBIS*, *The separation of Pterodroma madeira, (Zino's Petrel) from Pterodroma feae (Fea's Petrel)*, Vol 150 2 322-334

On 13 August 2010 there was a huge fire on Madeira, burning some 10% of the surface area of the island. This proved to be arson, though the perpetrators have never been brought to justice. It was to have been a record breeding year. The fires swept the breeding colonies and killed 38 juveniles, as well as five adults. The FCP managed to ring a single juvenile, PM0278, which later fledged. Somehow the fire did not destroy the main predators, rats and cats. All the traps had to be bought again and put back in position. Many nests were destroyed and artificial nests put in place by the PNM, a gigantic programme. All this was reported by Frank Zino and Manuel Biscoito in *Oryx* in 2011.

In 2011 three freshly dead adults were found at the entrance to their nests. As yet, there is no logical explanation for their deaths unless the fires produced some toxic substance that lingered in the nests and eventually killed the birds. Nevertheless, the numbers of juveniles were much better than feared and 16 were ringed and fledged.

Also, in 2011, Frank Zino and Manuel Biscoito published a paper with Richard Phillips of BAS, on the results from the dataloggers deployed between 2007 and 2010. This was published in *Birding World* and entitled *Zino's Petrel movements at sea; a preliminary*

*analysis of datalogger analysis.* This showed the areas covered by the petrels during the breeding season and migration. These data were used in a broader paper published in *Scientific Reports* in 2016, in which F. Zino and M. Biscoito were co-authors.

The results for 2012 were not as good as FCP had hoped and only nine juveniles were ringed and fledged. In that year all blood DNA samples from Areiro, Bugio and Cape Verde were re-analysed using more modern systems and a paper published in *Molecular Ecology*, in which Frank Zino was a co-author. It was entitled *The evolution of the North East Atlantic Gadfly Petrels, using statistical phylogeography.*

2013 saw the publication in *Sea Swallow* 62: 4–9 of an article by Frank Zino and Manuel Biscoito entitled *The effect of the fires of the 13th August 2010 on the breeding population of Zino's Petrel.*

The ringing fledging figures for the following years showed good progress: 2013,14 chicks; 2014,12; 2015, 29 (though two were found dead in the nest when checking if chicks had fledged or not); 2017,15 (all from the old nests; the IFCN was not given the FCP figures for the Manga LIFE); 2018, 23. RNBWS sent a two-man team to assess how best the Society could assist with conservation efforts (*Sea Swallow* 65: 3–9).

2018 saw the start of a project involving the FCP, IFCN and the University of Lisbon. Lisbon researchers wished to apply 25 GPS loggers on incubating birds, but the FCP strongly opposed this on the grounds that this meant handling some 30% of the known breeding population during incubation, which they felt was a large and unnecessary risk. In the event seven loggers were deployed with the loss of one nest. The results were interesting and accurate but did not really show much more than had been demonstrated by the dataloggers work which had been published in 2011.



**Plate 15.** Night work for Frank Zino and wife Buffy. The white cloth is for looking for lice.

In 2019 another 10 GPS loggers were deployed and all recovered with the loss of one egg.

However, 2019 also brought a horrendous cat situation. A cat or cats destroyed about ten birds on Manga dos Vómitos and Manga Rui Silva, information that was unfortunately withheld from the IFCN for some time. Sadly, the IFCN staff ringed juveniles, but did not return to see if they had fledged, which was bad, for if their parents were dead there was a high chance of them starving to death.

On the 31 October 2019 a juvenile was brought into the Museum and the FCP consulted. It had been ringed on the Manga Rui Silva on 23 September in nest 9. Ring PM0462. Normally chicks fledge by mid-October, but this one was very late in fledging and probably had been attracted to the lights of Funchal. It was very light at 173g, still had a great deal of down, and had it managed to get out to sea there is no doubt that all the down would have become waterlogged and it would have died. (It may well have been one of the chicks that had lost a parent, which would explain its retarded development). It was taken home by Frank Zino and fed fresh fish and squid for some 11 days, by which time most of the down had gone and its weight was up to 190g. It was taken about five miles offshore and released in very windy conditions. After a moment or two to gather its bearings it flew off in a southerly direction. It would be wonderful to recapture this bird in 4–5 years' time, which is when it is likely to make its first return.

### **Threats to survival remain a challenge**

The main threats to these birds on land remain: man, rats, cats, lights and fire. One cannot forget that they were once common in the archipelago, but man and his surrounding fauna caused its extinction on Porto Santo and left it with just a high-altitude remnant population on the main island. The team are also aware that the visiting of the nests on the breeding ledges causes great wear and tear on the ledges and may be detrimental. At sea the birds are threatened by lights on the shore and on fishing boats, especially when these are trying to catch bait fish. Marine pollution is also a major factor - one bird which had died was found to have a tangle of nylon fishing line in its gizzard. Climate change may also produce significant impacts on the birds, as sea temperature alterations will affect prey distribution and abundance, with unknown effects on birds migration and life cycles.

For all these reasons the IFCN and FCP have a continuing program of predator control and monitoring of the breeding population. This is very demanding on human resources as most nests are only visitable using special mountaineering techniques. The IFCN mountain team members are ageing and it will be important to take on new young wardens who can be trained by the experienced ones on how to deal with the birds.

The existence of an emblematic endemic species on the island of Madeira, known worldwide, is something to be proud of, but it also places a great responsibility on those entrusted with its protection. If a species becomes extinct, this is final and irreversible. That is a horrendous scenario and every care must be taken never to let it happen.

**Frank Zino**

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Plate 16. A hooked Wandering Albatross. © Fabiano Peppes, Projeto albatroz

## The Hookpod Project

by David Agombar, BTO employee and member of the Hookpod team

For an albatross, the difference between an easy meal and a grisly death can be a fine line. Each year, over 300,000 seabirds are killed by becoming hooked and drowned on longline hooks. At least 100,000 of these are albatrosses and bycatch in fisheries is the major source of mortality, leading to rapid and unsustainable declines in population. Of the 22 species of albatross, 15 are currently under threat of extinction. (Brothers, 1991; Nel, Ryan & Watkins, 2002; Sullivan, Reid & Bugoni, 2006; Anderson *et al.*, 2011; Melvin, Guy & Read, 2013).

### What's the problem?

The problem occurs when thousands of baited hooks are cast into the water, often on longlines running for many tens of kilometres. Birds dive down, take the bait and consequently get hooked and dragged underwater. Researchers have been working on this problem for decades, notably the Albatross Task Force of BirdLife International, and some solutions do already exist. These include the use of lead weights to make hooks sink faster, Tori, or streamer lines which are used to deter birds diving in the danger areas, and in many parts of the world setting lines is only permitted at night when birds are less active.

However, whilst these measures can show success in well observed and regulated fisheries such as South Africa, they are not always popular with fishermen and are not always used. Lead weights can fly back on board in the event of a 'bite-off' on the line, acting like bullets, and there are incidents where fishermen have been killed. Tori lines can often become entangled in the fishing gear causing operational difficulties. Night fishing regulations are often ignored and setting occurs largely in daylight hours to save time at sea.

A single, effective mitigation measure is needed to stop the deaths of seabirds and provide fishermen with an easy to use, operational answer.

### That's where the Hookpod comes in



**Plate 17.** A hooked Wandering Albatross is dragged on-board by fishermen in the tuna fleet off the coast of Brazil. © Fabiano Peppes, Projeto Albatroz

The Hookpod prevents bycatch, by covering the barb and point of the hook during setting, rendering it harmless. When the Hookpod and enclosed hook reach a depth of 20m, the device springs open by means of a patented pressure release system, releasing the hook to begin fishing, safely beyond the depth that birds dive to forage. Upon hauling, the reusable pod is simply closed and stored along with the normal fishing gear, ready to be used again and again.

The device has been developed over eight years of research and trials, working closely with fishermen around the world. The concept and original designs were made by a Devon based engineer, Ben Kibel, working with Pete his brother and seabird scientist Dr Ben Sullivan, then of the BirdLife Seabird Programme. Starting off as a large pod which covered the whole hook (but was too bulky for normal on-board storage) through stages of a micro-pod which literally just covered the barb of the hook, the Hookpod has seen many iterations. (See [www.hookpod.com](http://www.hookpod.com)).

The current model is tried and tested by fishermen, who have given very positive feedback. "These Hookpods are great and are working well for us" says Mike Te Pou, a New Zealand longline skipper, "It has taken away the dangers of using lead weights on our gear". Celso da Oliveira Rocha, a Brazilian tuna skipper, agrees. "I really like the equipment and intend to keep using it. In my view, it's the solution to seabird bycatch".

And it's not just skippers who are impressed. Having seen the Hookpod a few times now, Sir David Attenborough recently said "Every day, hundreds of albatrosses die in longline fisheries. But there is a unique and exciting new solution to halt this. It's called a Hookpod. Hookpods cover baited hooks as they enter the water and stop birds getting caught as they dive for baits. They are effective, easy to use, safe and economic for fishermen. If every pelagic longline fishing fleet used Hookpods, I believe we can stop the accidental death of these magnificent ocean wanderers."

In a recently published paper, (BJ Sullivan *et al.*), Hookpods were shown to be 95% effective at reducing seabird bycatch. In trials over four years and three separate fisheries, over 59,000 Hookpods were set and compared to 'normal' fishing gear using standard weighting and tori lines. These results were compelling. Of 25 birds killed, 24 were on the control lines. This represented a 0.8 birds per thousand hooks bycatch rate on standard gear, reduced to 0.04 birds per thousand hooks on Hookpods.

Critically for the fishermen, there was no impact on the target catch rate, meaning their operations are unaffected. They carry on as normal; just with 95% less seabird bycatch.

### Good for turtles too

There are seven species of sea turtles and of these, six are threatened with extinction. Once again, fisheries interactions are a critical factor in their survival. There are estimates of 200,000 loggerheads and 50,000 leatherbacks taken as pelagic longline bycatch in 2000 (Lewison *et al.*, 2004).



**Plate 18.** Up to 50,000 Leatherback Turtles are estimated to be killed each year by longline fisheries. © Hookpod Ltd

In recent trials in Brazil between June and September 2013, 29 Loggerhead Turtles *Caretta caretta* were caught. Nine were caught on Hookpod branchlines and 20 on standard branchlines. These results have shown that not only do Hookpods reduce seabird bycatch, they are also effective at reducing turtle bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries. Whilst the trials were not designed to explore impacts on turtle bycatch, the marked reduction in turtle bycatch on Hookpod branchlines has led to the planning of further trials to investigate this.

Up to 50,000 Leatherback Turtles are estimated to be killed each year as the result of longline fisheries.

Turtles are known to spend the majority of their time above 20m depth. It follows that if a Hookpod opening at 10m depth reduces bycatch rates of turtles by half, a pod that opens at 20m deep will be even more effective at providing cross-taxa mitigation. To test this, and prevent seabird bycatch, we have raised money to equip five Brazilian longliners with Hookpods. Working with Projeto Albatroz, we can ensure that these Hookpods are fitted and used correctly, providing observers to not only monitor seabird bycatch, but assess this potential for stopping turtle bycatch as well.

### **So why aren't all longline boats using them?**

Tuna fisheries around the world are regulated by the Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs). Setting the levels of catch, the standards of operations and considering every aspect from permissible gear types to sizes of fish allowed, they control the methods of preventing bycatch.

In May 2016, Hookpod was recommended by the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels as 'best-practice' mitigation for the pelagic longline industry. This set the scene for the acceptance of the Hookpod through the Science Committees, Technical Committees and finally the main annual meetings of the five RFMOs.

One of our current aims is working with contracting parties to these international organisations to gain a consensus that the Hookpod can be used as a standalone measure. We achieved the first of these approvals in December 2018, in the Western and Central Pacific and are actively looking to increase this to the other RFMOs. We can then begin actively to market the Hookpod as a standalone measure in these areas.

### **Exciting developments**

Following this approval in the Pacific, we are currently working with the New Zealand surface longline fleet and the Department of Conservation to encourage the use of Hookpods in the national tuna fleet. New Zealand is a seabird hotspot, considered the seabird capital of the world. More than a third of the 80 or so species of seabirds that breed in New Zealand are endemic, found nowhere else in the world. With this focus on the natural world, reducing seabird bycatch is a priority. It looks likely that in the coming season there will be widespread take up of Hookpod use across this fishery. This could act as a template for other countries, with government funding for the initial equipment and fishermen being responsible for the continuing replacements over time.

We are also working with retailers to increase the awareness and take-up of Hookpods in commercial tuna fleets. In May 2020 a demonstration project began working with Taiwanese longliners in the Indian Ocean, funded by Aldi US, who are deeply committed to improving the sustainable and seabird friendly nature of the seafood they sell. We are hopeful that these new developments mark the start of a new era of Hookpod use around the globe, and the beginning of the end of albatross deaths in longline fisheries.

## Stop press

After discussions with the New Zealand government they amended their regulations so that Hookpods can be used as a standalone seabird mitigation measure. Until recently boats had to use two of the three other mitigation measures - tori lines, extra line weighting and night setting. Following this amendment, the government decided to purchase a large number of Hookpods and are now issuing them free of charge to boats licenced to fish in their coastal waters. Initial reports are that those who are using them are pleased with how simple they are to operate and pleased too that now they are not catching seabirds. We hope to persuade other countries to follow New Zealand's example.

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**David Agombar**

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Plate 19. Arctic Skua, Orkney. © S Cook

## The BTO Arctic Skua research programme

by David Agombar & Liz Humphries (both of the BTO)

The Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* is one of our most attractive and inspiring seabirds. No other seabird can match an Arctic Skua for sheer agility in the air. It's a fast-flying pirate, able to dive and weave to steal fish from smaller seabirds such as guillemot, puffin and kittiwake. They breed on islands and areas close to other seabird colonies in the north of the UK. However, alarmingly, their populations have declined at a greater rate than those of any other UK seabird species, and an 81% decline between 1986 and 2014 has led to the species being Red-listed as a Bird of Conservation Concern (BOCC).

The BTO's research programme has already achieved a great deal and this article reveals what we have uncovered so far. By using GPS tracking devices we have been able to look at the breeding season movements of Arctic Skuas from two colonies (Rousay in Orkney, and Fair Isle) and to relate these movements to information on the breeding cycle and breeding performance of individual tagged birds.

In examining the data from Rousay, we have discovered that during the 2018 breeding season there was a marked difference in the foraging areas used by birds which successfully reared chicks and those which did not. The four successful birds were feeding almost exclusively in an area to the north-west of the colony, with tagged individuals rarely travelling more than 90 km during the incubation period.

This pattern was so striking that we overlaid bathymetry (water depth measurements) maps and discovered a deep hole, where the seafloor dropped to a depth greater than 140 m. Oceanography expert Beth Scott at Aberdeen University explained to us that this distinctive feature is very important around Orkney and Shetland. The topography of this area allows the water to stratify with a colder and nutrient-rich water layer underneath warmer waters above. Below the thermocline (the transition between these layers), there are waters that are good for primary production and consequently a suite of fish species which are only accessible to diving species such as guillemot and puffin. The nearby Scottish continental shelf generates internal waves and forces the nutrient-rich waters and the associated fish species upwards, which then become more available to the surface feeding seabirds such as kittiwake and tern species. These waters form part of a special Marine Protected Area, the only one in the Northern Isles for larvae sandeels - a key prey species for the seabird populations of Orkney and Shetland.

It is puzzling that not all the birds target this same area. We know that Arctic Skuas can consume a wide range of different food types including fish, small birds, berries and even cephalopods. So as a species they could be considered to be generalists, like some of the large gulls in the UK such as Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus argentatus* and *L. fuscus*. Research on these species has shown that some individuals are highly specialist in terms of their foraging behaviour and diet.

Could the same also be true for Arctic Skuas, which may show individual preference for host species and the likely prey they are taking? Or is it that some birds are more likely to focus on terrestrial sources of food compared to marine ones? We also need to think about ways in which we can investigate Arctic Skua diet, since they do not produce pellets like Great Skua and do not seem to regurgitate.

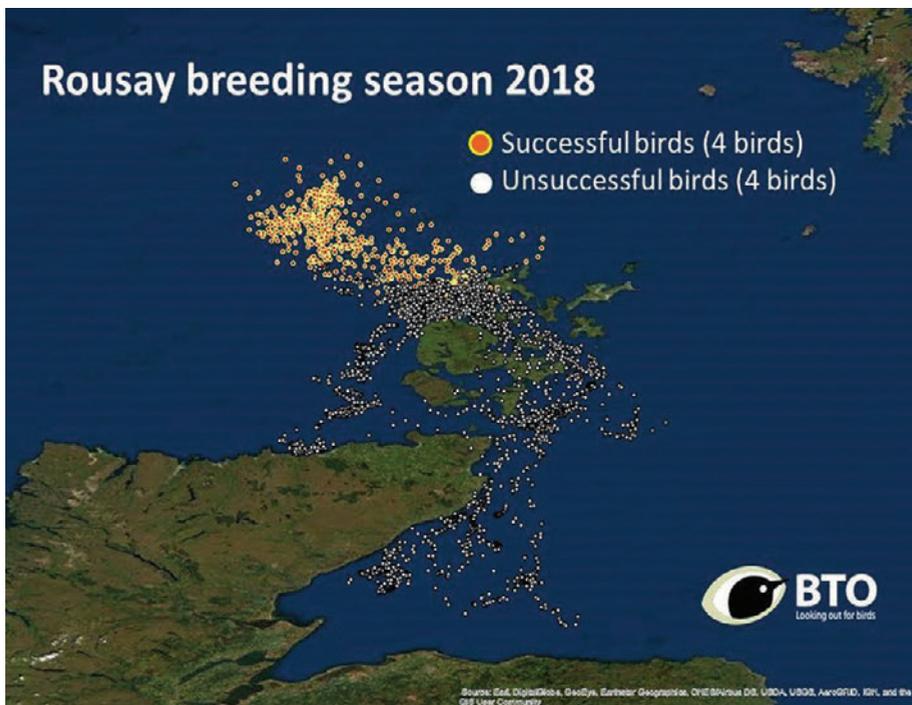


Figure 1. Rousay breeding season 2018.

The BTO were also interested in understanding whether Arctic Skuas face additional challenges outside the breeding season. Geolocators are a cost effective way of obtaining information on the movement patterns of long distance migrants, and some birds were fitted with these devices at the Fair Isle and Rousay colonies. These simple devices record day-length and when combined with an internal clock they can be used to infer where on the globe the bird was on a particular date and time. We run the data through a basic program that provides a quick presentation of the information before we carry out the detailed analyses required to refine the locations. One bird, tagged on Fair Isle in 2017 is shown to have wintered in South America in two consecutive years.

We will need data from more birds before we can make reasoned arguments about the similarities between the consecutive winters. We had planned to retrieve more geolocators in 2020 but because of the coronavirus pandemic this is now more likely to be in 2021. The locations shown are from preliminary analyses of the data recovered and further work is needed to correct some of the likely inaccuracies.

The map shows provisional wintering locations of seven of our eight birds across the two years. We have been struck, however, by the huge variation in areas used by birds from just two colonies, so it is fair to say these birds are less likely to be constrained in their choice of destination during winter.

We were very excited to start looking at the migration routes of our Arctic Skuas. During the autumn migration (August to October), they appear to spend time in the North Sea before heading out through the English Channel.

During spring migration, Arctic Skuas appear to be coming back to the colonies via the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, so, they are exhibiting a circular migration pattern similar to other species, like the Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*.

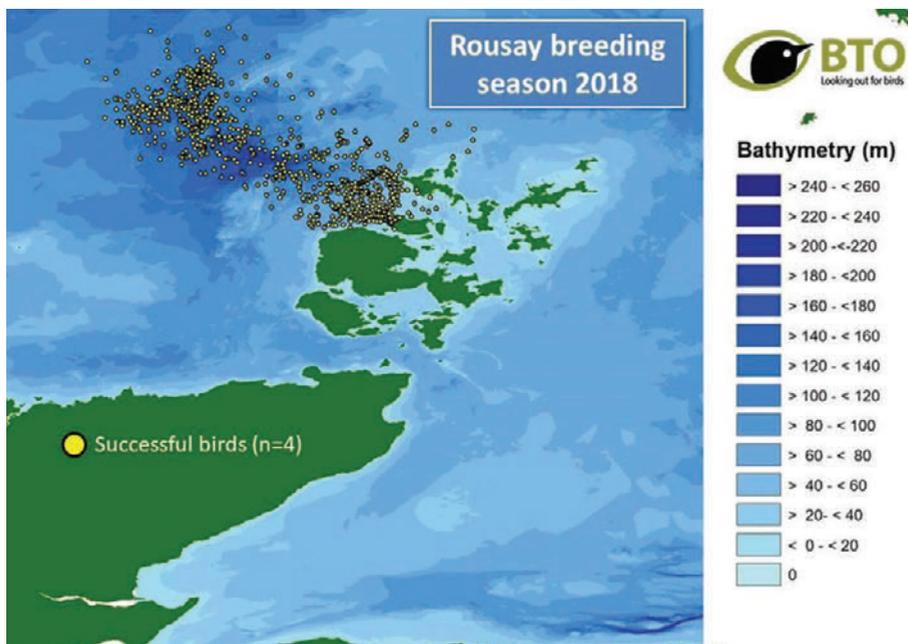


Figure 2. Rousay breeding season 2018, with water depth overlay.

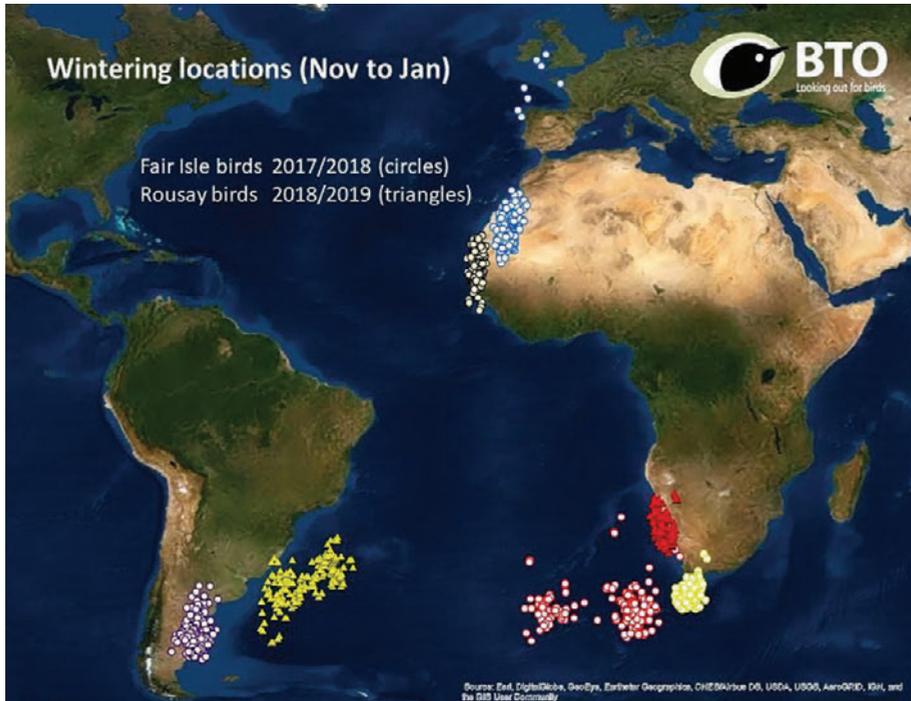


Figure 3. Wintering locations.

One of the main drawbacks of the geolocators is that they do not function well during the spring and autumn equinoxes - when day and night lengths are equal. Whilst we have been delighted to see the emerging story of Arctic Skua migration, we can lose up to 20 days either side of the equinoxes. This has been a particular issue during the Autumn Equinox, which coincides with the Arctic Skua Autumn migration period, resulting in the loss of a month of key data. The effect of the Spring Equinox is less of an issue since birds tend to still be at their wintering areas at this time.

We are starting to gain key insights into environmental factors which are likely to be important for Arctic Skuas and their host species. We still don't know where birds forage during the chick-rearing period. The GPS glue-mount method is very much a short-term approach, as the tags fall off after a short while and may not last for the whole of the chick-rearing period. To improve records we have been in contact with another skua researcher, Autumn-Lynn Harrison, who has successfully tried attaching satellite tags by a leg loop harness on a range of skua species breeding in Alaska. If we copied this approach it might also allow us to collect additional information during the breeding season and the autumn migration.

Further research to fill the gaps in our knowledge will depend on the generosity of people funding the work. For more details of the project and how to donate please see <https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/help-fund-our-work/appeals/tracking-arctic-skuas>.

**David Agombar & Liz Humphries**

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Plate 20. Northmavine survey area from Ronas Hill.

## **RAFOS/RNBWS Expedition to Mainland Shetland, June 2019 - results of seabird count, year 2**

by Group Captain Keith Cowieson,  
RAFOS Field Activities Liaison Officer

*(All photographs by the author except where indicated)*

In last year's *Sea Swallow* I wrote about the results of the seabird count in Orkney in 2018, and Stephen Chapman wrote a first impressions report of the joint RAFOS/RNBWS expedition to Mainland Shetland in 2019. This report brings things up to date, with the provisional results of that latter endeavour.

The Shetland task was far more challenging than the Orkney one a year before, with large inland tracts of Mainland Shetland to be surveyed. For self-evident reasons, survey organisers often have difficulty in getting coverage of the remote, sparsely-populated peatlands of Northmavine and the Western Mainland, but for us it was both a privilege and a pleasure to be afforded the opportunity to go and tramp the peat bog and peat hag-dominated landscape with the express intention of counting birds.

Our joint RAFOS/RNBWS team was 13 strong, and it was with a sense of keen expectation that we arrived in Lerwick from Aberdeen in mid-June, courtesy of generous NorthLink Ferries' sponsorship. Our task, to survey as many of the inland grid squares on the northern and western Mainland peninsulas as practicable. This account is focused on Northmavine, where I was to spend 12 exhilarating days.

Planning and map study for the survey work revealed opportunities for exploring rarely visited parts of the archipelago, much of it lying north of latitude 60° North i.e. on a similar latitude to Bergen in Norway. And an early indication of the nature of the terrain and latitude was afforded when, taking advantage of an early arrival on the islands I visited Ronas Hill, the highest point in the Shetlands at 450 metres. The Arctic alpine, granite, fellfield terrain there is similar to that found on the highest Cairngorms at 1200–1300 metres, although the bird assemblage was rather different. Where I would have expected to find Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta*, Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus* and Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* in similar habitat in the Cairngorms, the resident Shetland birds were Oystercatcher *Haemotopus ostralegus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, Skylark *Alauda arvensis* and Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* in the lee of the hill. To the north, I could see the furthest part of our survey area, the rolling unspoilt peatlands of Northmavine, studded with lochs, dubh-lochans and a myriad of pools harbouring who knows how many breeding seabirds and other species.

### Seabirds count priorities

Once again, the priority for our Seabirds Count work on Mainland Shetland was to focus on skua and inland gull colonies, as some of these species are giving rise to conservation concern. The State of the UK's Birds (SUKB) 2017 (JNCC 2018) records that Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* numbers have declined by 64% since Seabird 2000 - the greatest decline of any UK breeding seabird over the period. Conversely, Great Skua *Stercorarius skua* have prospered, increasing by 18% since Seabird 2000 (JNCC 2018).



Plate 21 a. Dark phase Arctic Skua and b. chick still with egg-tooth.

### Observations

So, what did we observe during our survey and what lessons were we able to identify for future breeding seabird surveyors? The task on Northmavine was simple; walk as many of the remote, nominated grid squares visited during Seabird 2000 as time, weather and resources permitted, and conduct a snapshot, single-visit survey. Our observations are tabulated below, alongside Seabird 2000 results:

**Table 1.** Changes in inland breeding seabird populations on Northmavine (from 149 Grid Squares), 2000 v 2019<sup>1</sup>

Species	Seabird 2000	Seabirds Count	% Change
Arctic Skua	32 AOT	15 AOT	-53
Great Skua	77 AOT	149 AOT	+94
Great Black-backed Gull	28 AOT	38 AON/AOT	+36
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	2 AOT	N/A
Herring Gull	6 AOT	2 AOT	-67
Common Gull	65 AOT	177 AON/AOT*	+172
Black-headed Gull	21 AOT	34 AON/AOT	+62
Arctic Tern	0	N/AOT	N/A

<sup>1</sup> Health warning - 2019 figures not yet checked. \*AON/AOT - Apparently Occupied Nests/ Apparently Occupied Territories

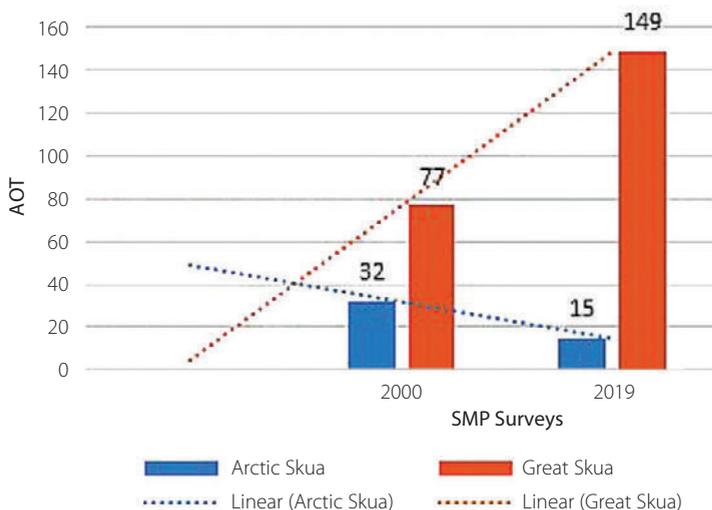
Source: Seabird Monitoring Programme On-line Database <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/smp/Default.aspx>

### Inland gull observations

Inland breeding gulls on Northmavine appear to be doing well. Although relatively thin on the ground on the peatlands, many higher, drier, ridges boasted at least one pair of Great Black-backed Gulls *Larus marinus*, often several in loose groupings - and they were the only gulls found close to concentrations of breeding Great Skua, being quite capable of holding their own with such aggressive, predatory neighbours. Meanwhile Common Gulls *Larus canus* have done particularly well, certainly living up to their name in Mainland Shetland, almost tripling in number since Seabird 2000, with many lochs, dubh-lochans and pools hosting small colonies. Away from the peatlands, on the moorland fringes, we encountered two large and several medium-sized Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* colonies with some isolated groups and pairs on adjacent shorelines.

### Skua observations

On Northmavine, our skua observations from the 149 grid squares surveyed mirrored the recent SUKB trends. Arctic Skua numbers were down 53% over the period from 32 to 15 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT), while Great Skua numbers had almost doubled, increasing by an impressive 94% from 77 to 149 AOTs.



Where Great skuas bred in the greatest density, Arctic skuas were absent, and although no predation by Great Skua of Arctic skuas, eggs or chicks was observed, the ‘top down’ pressure of the burgeoning population of competing/predatory Great Skua does conform to the broad thrust of the ‘combined bottom-up / top-down pressures’ effect judged to have led to catastrophic Arctic Skua declines in Scotland (Perkins *et al.*, 2018).

**Figure 1.** Changes in skua populations on Northmavine, 2000 v 2019

## Lessons identified

Two years of breeding seabird surveying, concentrating on priority breeding skuas, inland nesting gulls and terns, have reinforced lessons identified on Orkney last year, namely that in order to survey such species comprehensively, transect walking and flush counting are the two most accurate and effective methods - as laid out in the 'Seabird monitoring handbook for Britain and Ireland' (Walsh *et al.*, 1995) and 'Bird Census Techniques, 2nd Edition' (Bibby *et al.*, 1992).

Sadly, Arctic Skua territories were few and far between on Northmavine, and easily overlooked, as the birds here were relatively undemonstrative, unless surveyors were heading directly towards nest, eggs or chicks. In this respect, I suspect that Arctic Skua numbers in such habitat are highly likely to be under-recorded, despite the best efforts of surveyors. For example, on one occasion while following an agitated Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* that clearly had a nest nearby, an isolated incubating pale-phase Arctic Skua popped into the field of view of my binoculars, only 40 metres or so away. Up until that point, there had been no indication of resident Arctic Skua in an area that we had passed through only five minutes previously. Had it not been for the agitated Whimbrel drawing our attention to the skua's nesting area, it would undoubtedly have been overlooked. On three or four similar occasions, breeding Arctic Skua pairs only became obvious when we were within 30 metres or so and heading directly towards them, despite having scoped or glassed the area at regular intervals on the approach.

By contrast, the behaviour of the larger Great Skua was much more obvious with off-the-nest birds flying out to inspect approaching surveyors at ranges of 2–300 metres, often revealing previously unnoticed birds and territories. In this respect our findings mirror those of last year - namely that transect walking is the only sure way of surveying the bulk of breeding skua territories in rolling peatland landscapes, and even then a proportion of Arctic Skua pairs is inevitably going to be overlooked if a close approach is not made. In Northmavine, the peat hag-dominated landscape essentially rendered any attempt at accurately surveying skuas from vantage points pointless, because of the significant areas of dead ground hidden by folds and dips in the undulating landscape.

However, these techniques are not without their apparent hazards. Aggressive nest defence by skuas, gulls and terns can be intimidating for experienced and novice breeding seabird surveyors alike. Although it is unusual to be physically struck, it is nevertheless an unnerving experience for many, and some recommend not only wearing stout headgear but also holding a walking pole or suchlike above head-height, as birds invariably attack the highest point of the intruder.



**Plate 22.** Skua transect surveyors tackle typical Northmavine peat hag terrain. © Mike Hayes



**Plate 23.** Surveyor under 'Bonxie' attack, chick in the centre foreground, characteristic 'Bonxie' fertilised mound in centre middle-ground.

One further technique that has served me well over the years is that of facing the attacker, and looking them directly in the eye during attack runs/mobbing behaviour. In my experience, the birds will always veer away or pull up short. Conversely, turning one's back on the birds can lead to being hit, occasionally - and I have had the odd bump to prove it. It was therefore fascinating to read the recent findings of researchers at the University of Exeter, suggesting that urban gull feeding behaviour may be influenced by human behavioural cues, such as gaze direction. Seventy five percent of urban gulls were deterred from approaching food sources, and those that did took significantly longer to do so, when experimenters' gaze was directed towards them, compared with when directed away (Goumas *et al.*, 2019). This certainly bears out my personal experience when translated to attacking and mobbing seabirds. My recommendation to fellow breeding seabird surveyors is to face attacking seabirds directly, if possible, and look them straight in the eye as you make your way gingerly through tern, gull and skua colonies. This should not only deter too close an approach, but also allow you to marvel, safely, at the birds' innate grace, manoeuvrability and natural defensive behaviour at impressively close quarters! The trick is just to hold your nerve...

As reported last year, another good giveaway for locating Great Skua (and Great Black-backed Gull) territories and nest sites are the vivid patches of well-manured, green plots in otherwise uniform brown peat and heathland-dominated landscapes. These invariably indicate historical breeding sites and lookout posts, well-fertilised by guano and the decomposing corpses of prey over the years.

### **Seabird nest incorporation of débris**

In 2018, Dr Nina O'Hanlon of the University of the Highlands and Islands requested that surveyors note any seabird nest incorporation of plastic during their work, in order that the proportion of nests affected could be ascertained. This innovative and worthy, topical initiative has grown like topsy, and proved so successful that it has now spawned a website of its own, not only cataloguing plastic incorporation in seabird nests, but also the presence of other débris in all bird species' nests, worldwide (Birds & Débris, 2019). On Mainland Shetland we found that many

shorelines on both survey areas contained varying amounts of plastic and other litter, and four nests with plastic and other debris incorporated were found on Northmavine; two Arctic Tern nests in wrack and flotsam-littered shingle beaches, containing thread-like plastic, plastic rope and metal wire; one Oystercatcher's nest immediately adjacent to old plastic sacking; and a Ringed Plover's nest immediately adjacent to a length of plastic rope. One of the tern's nests was part of a small colony of 12 pairs, the other an isolated pair, both on shingle bars just above the Mean High Water mark.



**Plate 24.** Arctic tern incubating on nest incorporating thread-like plastic rope.

## Summary

In total, 243 SMP Grid Square and other sites were surveyed by RAFOS and RNBWS members on Shetland. The sites ranged in character from 300ft vertical cliffs, through tundra-like heather moorland and peat hags and bog, to stretches of sandy and shingle beaches. Personnel covered between 7–15 miles on foot, daily, often over demanding and unforgiving terrain and in all weathers. In addition, the teams completed 18 species lists for BTO's BirdTrack at the 10 Km square level. A total of 961 BirdTrack records were created in the survey areas with 72 species recorded. Meanwhile, three submissions were made to the British Birds Rarities Committee, several nest record cards covering a variety of species are in the process of being generated for the BTO Nest Record Scheme, four Nest Incorporation of Débris Forms were posted on the Birds & Débris website and three Pollinator Monitoring Scheme, Flower Insect Timed (FIT) count records were submitted to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology FIT database.

I much look forward to the final Seabirds Count season, originally planned for 2020 but now rescheduled for 2021.

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# Winter on Bird Island, Falkland Islands with Black-browed Albatrosses

by Rachael Orben, Assistant Professor (Senior Research),  
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(All photographs by the author)

While some iconic Falkland seabird species migrate over winter, several species are resident year-round. Others are termed partial migrants, with the population split between those that migrate and those that do not. It may surprise some readers, but it appears that the last include Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*, which traditionally have been lumped into the migration category.

All this I came to realise when Dr Alastair Bayliss, Dr Kayleigh Jones and I camped on Bird Island, off the SW tip of West Falkland in the southern winter of 2018 to study the fur seals there, and noticed that Black-browed Albatross were present in the breeding colony, albeit in small numbers. This prompted me to develop a study to track this unique subset of individuals roosting at a breeding colony during winter. I was aware that this roosting behavior during the non-breeding period is not unprecedented for albatross, for Shy Albatross *Diomedea cauta* nesting in Australia do so (Hedd & Gales 2005), but it is not a common phenomenon.

Conditions experienced during winter can have profound long term effects on individual fitness and survival of seabirds, but little detailed movement data for



Figure 1. Bird Island.

seabirds is available outside breeding periods. Vessel survey data give us some understanding of distribution over winter, but it is not possible to link sightings of unmarked individuals to breeding colonies or other individual characteristics. Additionally, tags used to track birds over winter tend to be expensive or have a large location error (e.g., satellite tags) and use is limited by when and where birds can be caught. Satellite tags send consecutive transmissions that are received by the Argos satellites and used



Plate 25. Peregrine.

to calculate a location fix. Some readers might also be familiar with geolocation dataloggers. These inexpensive tags are small enough to attach to leg bands and locations are calculated from an internal clock and a light sensor. The location errors from geolocation tags are however estimated to be on the order of 185 km (Phillips *et al.* 2004). The most cost effective and accurate tags are archival GPS tags, but these tags need to be recovered to download data and their size limits their attachment to feathers that are moulted during winter.

In July 2019, Dr. Alastair Baylis, Nick Rendell and I embarked on the Falkland Islands sailing vessel *Peregrine*, ably sailed by Liev Poncet, to reach Bird Island in the south western corner of the Falkland Islands to study fur seals and albatross. Bird Island has a relatively small breeding population of South American Fur Seals *Arctocephalus australis* (Baylis, Orben, *et al.* 2019), but it is large enough to offer a reasonably protected camping location, unlike most of the other islands in the archipelago where South American Fur Seals breed. South American fur seals pup in December, but the lactation period lasts until October, effectively making them year-round residents. In the summer Bird Island is also used by nesting Black-browed Albatross (about 14,000 breeding pairs), Rockhopper Penguins *Eudyptes c. chrysocome*, Imperial Shags *Phalacrocorax atriceps*, and large numbers of prions.

We arrived at Bird Island on 17 July and left on 21 August. Our camp consisted of a large dome tent with a similarly sized vestibule that we used to store gear and as a kitchen. We had small sleeping tents set up near-by. We brought drinking water with us, and I am afraid it was too cold to bathe! To stay connected with the outside world we used a small battery powered radio to tune into Falklands radio. Winter is often calmer than summer, although there were several storms including one period of particularly strong southerly winds (forecasted to 60 knots), during which we collapsed the larger tent and made do with the smaller tents for shelter. The large tussocks provided good protection from the wind, but the storm came with impressive wind and waves. Otherwise the weather was often above freezing and while we had hail and snow, we also had some lovely sunny days.

In addition, to the fur seals and albatross, Bird Island provides winter habitat for a number of other species. This includes those that feed on carrion including numerous Striated Caracaras *Phalacrocorax australis*, Southern Crested Caracaras *Caracara plancus*, Turkey Vultures *Cathartes aura*, Giant Petrels *Macronectes* spp, Snowy Sheathbills *Chionis alba*, Dolphin Gulls *Leucophaeus scoresbii*, Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*, and Tussac-birds *Cinclodes antarcticus*. Imperial shags often roost on a large headland and Rock Shags *Phalacrocorax magellanicus* can be seen roosting on cliffs. Cobb's Wrens *Troglodytes cobbi* are found on the small landing beach along with Blackish Oystercatchers *Haematopus ater*, Falkland Steamer Ducks *Tachyeres brachypterus*, and Kelp Geese *Chloephaga hybrida*. In the interior of the island we saw a few Upland Geese *Chloephaga picta*, Grass Wrens *Cistothorus platensis* and White-bellied Finches *Melanodera melanodera*, while Yellow billed Teal *Anas flavirostris* frequented the small lake. Southern Sea Lions *Otaria flavescens* were very common and we saw the occasional Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonine*. During our time on Bird Island we were also fortunate to spot two Great Albatross (*Diomedea* spp.) from shore and had a very brief sighting of an Orca pod *Orcinus orca*.



**Plate 26 a.** Black-browed Albatross. **b.** Snowy Sheathbill. **c.** Cobb's Wren. **d.** Blackish Oystercatcher. **e.** Turkey Vulture. **f.** female Fur Sea.



**Plate 27.** Big waves.

When we arrived in July there were some albatross in the nesting colony just above the valley where we set up camp, but numbers were noticeably fewer than in 2018. We were able to deploy archival GPS tags (Mr. Lee CatTrack, 25g) on 15 Black-browed Albatross over the next couple of weeks, the tags set to 10 min intervals and expected to last at least three weeks. We marked the tagged birds with paint on their breast and each day I carefully scanned the colony for returning tagged birds. Unfortunately, I was only able to spot one bird. I saw the paint mark before it landed in the colony and we were able to climb up to it and recapture it easily. A second tagged bird was sighted a week or so later, but it flew away before I was able to get close. In addition to the tagging work, I counted the number of birds in the colony each day to compare to counts from 2018.



**Plate 28.** Black-browed Albatross.



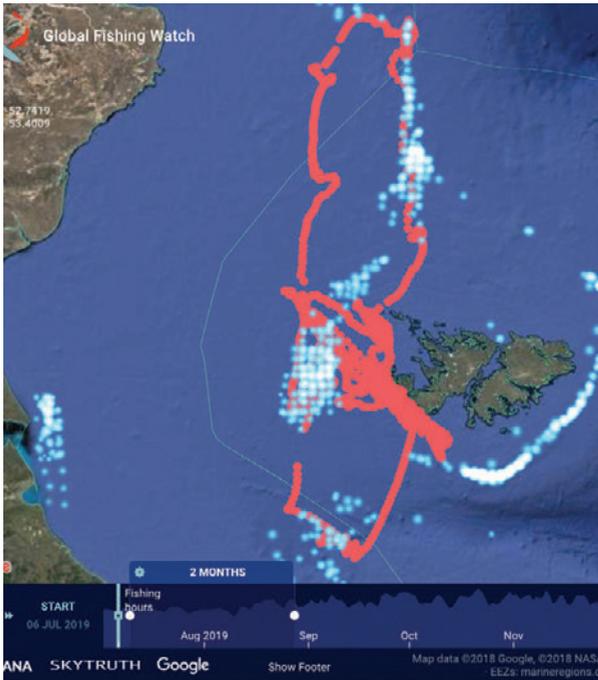
**Plate 29.** Black-browed Albatross colony slope.



**Plates 30–32. (top)** Black-browed Albatross in the colony. **(bottom left)** Black-browed Albatross colony with camp in the valley below. **(bottom right)** Black-browed Albatross capture.

Once back in Stanley I downloaded the GPS datalogger. The tag collected data for the full deployment period (26 July–16 Aug) and marks the first fine-scale location data for a Black-browed Albatross during winter in the region. The bird had spent much time foraging near the southwestern coast of the Falkland Islands but also made a short loop into the Argentinian EEZ to the south, some 215 km from Bird Island, and then to the north, about 560 km from Bird Island. The scale of these movements is very similar to the area used by birds during the breeding period (Baylis, Tierney, *et al.* 2019). During chick brooding Black-browed Albatross from the Falklands are known to associate with fishing vessels in low numbers, with some individuals specializing on this foraging strategy (Granadeiro *et al.* 2011, 2014). One of my original questions was how frequently might these more resident birds encounter fishing vessels? Using

Global Fishing Watch (<https://globalfishingwatch.org>) I overlaid the track with fishing effort in July and August. While this approach doesn't allow for temporal matching, it is clear that fisheries and the albatross track overlap in space, and while one track does not provide a statistically adequate sample, the fine-scale movements of this bird shed light on the foraging ecology of this species during an understudied time period and will provide the foundation for future research efforts.



## Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the RNBWS for their Captain David Simpson Research Scholarship grant, which paid for logistics support for the Black-browed Albatross project. Also to the PADI Foundation who provided funds for the GPS dataloggers. Animal Care and Use Permits for albatross handling and tagging were obtained for Oregon State University and the Falkland Islands Government.

**Figure 2.** Overlay of bird track (red) with fishing tracks (blue), July and August 2019.

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# More seawatching off Cyprus in autumn

by Colin Richardson

(All photographs by the author)

*Colin, a retired architect, was for many years the RNBWS rep in the Gulf. In 2002 he retired to Cyprus and is now our representative there.*

I wrote about my seawatching experiences in Cyprus from 2003–2014 in *Sea Swallow 64*, so I thought it was time for an update, and with the addition of some photos. Here is my latest offering for the years 2015–19.

Very few birders undertake seawatching in Cyprus, because for most of the year it can be a hot and unrewarding task, with very few birds to look at. Only in winter do hundreds of gulls (mainly Black-headed *Larus ridibundus*, Yellow-legged *L. michahellis*, Caspian *L. cachinnans* & Armenian *L. armenicus*) appear at ports and along the beaches adjacent to seafood restaurants, while terns and skuas (just Arctic *Stercorarius parasiticus* and Pomarine *S. pomarinus*) are uncommon at all times. Only two shearwaters, Scopoli's *Calonectris diomedea* and Yelkouan *Puffinus yelkouan*, are on the Cyprus list, wanderers from colonies further west in the Mediterranean and seldom seen by landlubbers. I do my seawatching at Polis, which overlooks Chrysochou Bay on the north west coast of the island, facing due north towards the Turkish mainland. I have made this a late summer necessity for over 16 years, while waiting for land birds to arrive on my home patch. Seawatching at Polis has proved very interesting indeed, and reminds me of the many happy hours I spent trainspotting beside the west coast main line on a Bank Holiday in the 60s. You just never know what's going to come over the horizon!



**Plate 33.** The author seawatching at Chrysochou Bay, Cyprus.

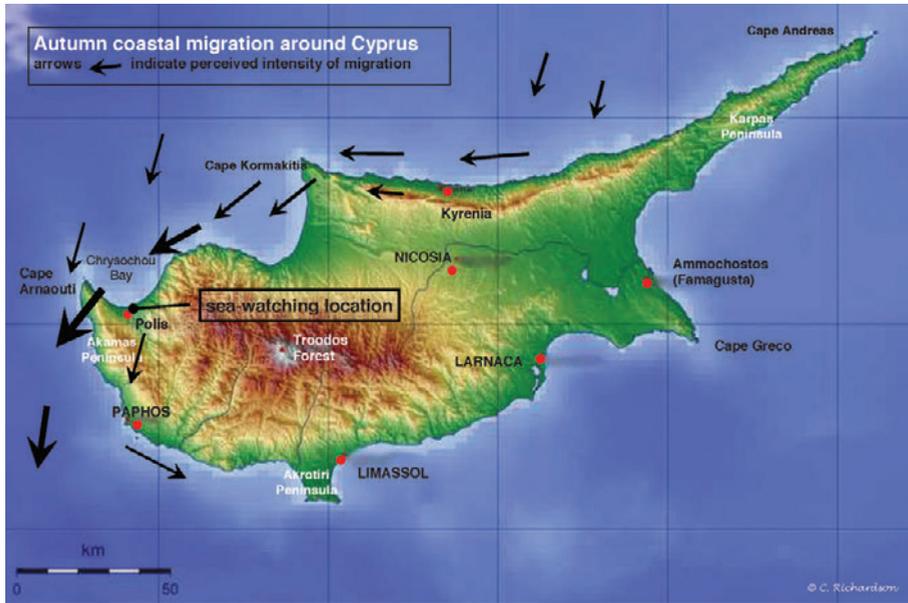


Figure 1. Autumn coastal migration around Cyprus.

In 2016 and 2018 I started the season seawatching in mid June, but it was rather early in the season and very little was moving apart from small numbers of locally bred Mediterranean Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmerati*, Yellow-legged Gulls, an early migrant Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, an early dispersing Scopoli's Shearwater and four tired Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius*.

However, come July visible migration over the sea really gets going. Two Grey Herons *Ardea cineria* appeared on the 4th (2015), a single Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* on the 6th (2019), Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* and Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* on the 9th (2015), Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* on the 10th, Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* and Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* on the 12th (2015) and Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* on the 13th (2016). The commonest duck to migrate over the sea in any numbers was Garganey *Anas querquedula* and 47 made their first appearance on 16 July (2019). Other July peak flocks were 52 Wood Sandpipers on 25 July (2018), 24 Glossy Ibis on 26 July (2016) and 29 Common Sandpipers on 31 July (2016).



Plate 34. A small group of Glossy Ibis passing at eye level.



**Plate 35.** A group of migrating Black-winged Stilts, joined by a single Black-tailed Godwit, a rare occurrence.

August brought an increase in the number of species, mostly in small groups, usually less than 20, of Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* (nominate race *fuscus*, 'Baltic Gull') and Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* appearing along the coast, doggedly flying low over the sea towards the west and south. Tired Common Kingfishers *Alcedo atthis* would suddenly appear in the casuarina trees lining the coast and often spend the day happily taking small fish in the shallows. Similarly, exhausted Eurasian Hoopoes *Upupa epops* would come into view over the sea, frantically heading for shore, but their semaphore-like wings would give them away and many fell prey to patrolling Eleonora's Falcons *Falco eleonora* which had flown from their nearest breeding colonies 35 miles away. There were other surprises too, including single Red-necked Grebes *Podiceps grisegena* on 2 and 27 Aug 2015 (the 8th and 9th Cyprus records), an impressive loose flock of 202 Alpine Swifts *Apus alba* on 18 Aug 2017, 36 Demoiselle Cranes *Grus virgo* in v-formation on 27 Aug 2016 and 42 Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* flying amongst a group of Garganey on 29 Aug 2019, matching the ducks in size and speed. Some numbers were pretty large: 395 Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea* (in 10 groups) on 31 Aug 2016, 395 Glossy Ibis (in 13 groups) on 2 Aug 2019, 793 Garganey (in several groups, the largest 300) on 19 Aug 2016 and 226 White-winged Terns on 19 Aug 2016.

Numbers increased again in September. This was the busiest month for waterbirds, with sometimes hundreds of birds per hour appearing over the horizon. The largest counts I saw of the main species were as follows: 28 Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* on 11 Sep 2018, 318 Grey Heron on 27 Sep 2015, 720 Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* on 4 Sep 2016, 96 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* on 18 Sep 2015, 85 Glossy Ibis on 1 Sep 2017 and 910 Garganey on 4 Sep 2017. Altogether over the five years I logged 10,104 Garganey passing south making it the most common species observed, totalling more than all other ducks combined. And virtually none of these birds ever made landfall.



Plates 36–37. (top) A group of migrating Grey Heron. (bottom) Purple Herons looking for a roost site at Polis Bay.



**Plates 38–39. (top)** A group of Demoiselle Cranes, a surprise arrival off the sea on 23 August 2016.  
**(bottom)** A group of Purple and Black-crowned Night Herons.

There were lots of other surprises too, and some of the less common species passing over the sea during this five-year period included, in September, several groups of up to 80 Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* flying up and down the coast for hours, seemingly lost; in August occasional Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, resting on the shoreline, their favoured tidal mudflats being totally absent from the Cyprus coast; in late August, twice small parties of Pied Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* passing far offshore. In mid-August 2017 I saw my largest group of 13 Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola*; seven Marsh Sandpipers *Tringa stagnatilis* passed south over the sea in mid August 2015; four Arctic Skuas headed steadily south over the waves in late September 2019; and in September 2015 three Caspian Terns *Hydroprogne caspia* passed quite close before towering up until lost from sight overland.

On some days there were virtually no birds for hours, enough to put many local birders off seawatching. But that never dampens my enthusiasm, so I will no doubt go again this autumn, just to see what appears over the horizon.

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Plate 40. Redwing on board MV *Balmoral*, North Sea, October 2019.

## Autumn migration by assisted passage in the North Sea

by Malcolm Calvert

(All photographs by the author)

MS *Balmoral* of Fred Olsen cruise line departed Bremen during the evening of 4 October 2019 en route to Port of Tyne, returning from a German Waterways cruise.

During the early morning of 5 October it became apparent that many migratory birds were on board as the vessel crossed the North Sea. Prevalent were Redwings *Turdus iliacus*, Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* and Song Thrushes *Turdus philomenus* with each species numbering 20 or more.

Throughout the day further species came into view: eight Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla*, four Robins *Erithacus rubecula*, four Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, three Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita*, two Willow Warblers *P. trochilus*, three Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis*, two Wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes* and a Blackcap *Motracilla atricapilla*.



Plate 41 a. Goldcrests b. Song Thrush c. Willow Warbler, on board MV *Balmoral*, North Sea, October 2019.

Whereas the passerines scuttled about the decks, often in proximity to passengers, a Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* preferred the quieter parts of the upper decks, while a Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* and a Dunlin *Calidris albina* took refuge amongst the items of machinery on the bow.

Sadly, there were a few fatalities, with Song Thrushes and Goldcrests flying into the side windows of promenade deck in reflected sunlight, and a hapless Song Thrush dropped on to the sea in the ship's wake some one hundred yards short of reaching the vessel.

The wind was around force 4 south-south east for most of the day; air temperature of 12°C was recorded at noon with partly cloudy skies.

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# Birding when warships are on operations

## 1. HMS Kent - Gulf shipping protection 2019

Lieutenant Joe Jeffrey, Boarding Officer

In February 2019, after a busy and fulfilling 18 months at sea in HMS *Monmouth*, I found myself confined to a desk in the Fleet Headquarters. However, fate stepped in, with the swift despatch of HMS *Kent* to the Gulf - and a pierhead jump for me as Boarding Officer. I thought I'd hit the jackpot.

Wrong! As with much in life, this really was too good to be true, for once we were on station the realities of serving in an operational warship hit home.

Extended periods at high readiness meant that the upper deck was out of bounds for most of each day. Even when we were allowed up top, my run, circuit training, birding or chat on the bridge wing would usually be abruptly cut short by the inevitable 'quick draw' pipe when I would dive to the nearest hatch and rush below, on my way bumping into the gunners who at the same time would be off to man their upper deck weapons for the fifth time that morning.

Another anti-birding snag was that we stayed in the wrong time zone for the first month or so, a mechanism designed to keep us in sync with our local shore headquarters, but one that meant that sunset each day was just after 1600.

So in short, while it was good operational stuff, it was hopeless from a birding point of view. It wasn't anybody's fault. "Sir, I know we're being closed by an unidentified craft but I'm really keen to get a closer look at the bird flying around the aft end" doesn't exactly go down well in most COs' books.

There was however one bright moment in all of this. One morning whilst out for my daily thirty-minute run I was joined by a pair of falcons - kestrels, I think - weaving their way in and out of the aft sponsons as gracefully as they might in the open air. Undeterred by my presence, they would happily fly straight at me only to barrel roll away at the last moment and long after I'd formed the certainty in my mind that I was about to collide with them. When taking a rest they simply perched on the guard rails within reach of my hand as I laboured round the upper deck. Once I was finished I sat down on the bollards to enjoy the rest of their show. Nobody else was out yet. No camera with me, no binoculars, no quickdraw, just me, the birds and a warm sea breeze. Bliss.



Plate 42. Man at work. Lt Jeffrey, HMS *Kent*. © J Jeffrey

Sad to say, despite trying a stint with my camera later that day and again in the days that followed, I never did see those birds again.

So was it worth it? Yes, of course! Being on operations was quite a challenge, and the job of Boarding Officer certainly had its moments, but as for birding, that will have to wait till next time.

**Joe Jeffrey**

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## **2. HMS Liverpool - 2011, off Libya** **CPO Mark Cutts, Naval Stores Chief**

The ship was preparing for a Gulf deployment and six months in the Middle East, but the events in Libya in February of that year meant that the ship spent the most of 2011 patrolling the Mediterranean during what became known as the Libyan Civil War.

The ship arrived in theatre on 2 April just in time for the start of the spring migration, with much potential for sightings of migrants. However, as the ship was under the threat of attack from Colonel Gaddafi's forces on the mainland we spent most of the time closed up either at Action Stations or in Defence Watches.

This situation lasted for many months, but during lulls I would take every opportunity to wander the upper deck looking for any 'passengers' that might have found their way onboard. I could rarely take a camera, and I recall a few missed opportunities such as the European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* roosting on the *Do Not Open at Flying Stations* sign.

Often I would get a call on the internal phone from the helicopter maintainers in the hangar. Months before I had placed a sticker next to their phone stating "Bird Warning Red - Call 243". So, if not under threat of immediate attack I would dash up through the ship to see what was hitching a ride. Over the months this varied from a Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* perched on the Helicopter's tail to a Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* on the Flight deck nets. A quick look and it was always straight back to work, although later the details would be added to my notebook along with the Lat and Long for the record.

We also acted as a field hospital on a few occasions when birds would be found moribund or listless on the upper deck. Fresh water was the first thing that they needed, with dried mealworms and suet pellets offered as well. A Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* and a Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* were amongst those that flew off after a short rest in a cardboard box in the quiet seclusion of the Main Naval Store. Sadly others were not so fortunate, finding the exertion of migration too much for them and perishing despite our best efforts.

In the end 43 different species were seen before we sailed out of the Mediterranean on 4 November, just a few weeks after the war had ended.

**Mark Cutts**

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### 3. HMS York - February 2011, operations off Libya

#### CPO Steve Copsey, Electronics Maintainer

The ship was on its way to the Falklands when we were diverted into the Mediterranean to assist with evacuating British nationals from Libya. We stopped at Malta en route to pick up a detachment of Royal Marines, and the plan was to sail into Benghazi, tie up alongside and pick up the people. The wardroom had a full planning meeting for the event, but I wasn't there - I knew I wouldn't be much involved, other than maybe closing up if we had to.



Plate 43 a. Pomarine Skua. b. Arctic Skua. c. Audouin's Gull. d. Benghazi Harbour. © S Copsey

I was then piped to the wardroom, where I was asked/volunteered to be ship's photographer as they all knew I was always on the upper deck photographing birds. This was perfect for me, as I knew the upper deck was going to be out of bounds for all personnel except weapon crews - and now me! I was given a helmet and flak jacket and instructed to photograph anything of interest as we sailed in, and then to accompany the Marines ashore. The approach was superb; I snapped Pomarine Skuas *Stercorarius pomarinus*, Arctic Skuas *S. parasiticus* and even had a first, an Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii* on the Benghazi breakwater. What a result! Once the ship tied up I stepped onto Libyan soil and as requested snapped pictures I thought were of interest. From the looks of things, it was mostly Chinese people queuing on the dockside as they boarded an old ferry that was bound for Malta. As we moved away from the ship I teamed up with a young Royal Marine and we walked out onto some waste ground a few hundred metres away. Ideal, I thought; there must be a lark or two out here. We eventually stopped and I viewed the ground through the camera but did not see much other than a few House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. It was then it happened. Not far away there was a very loud bang. I naively looked at the bootie (who had probably already completed tours in Iraq and Afghanistan) and said, "Is that a car back firing, shipmate?". He looked back at me witheringly and said "no chief, that's H.E. (high explosive)!" At that point I realised how very exposed our position was, and how far away the ship was - but as it happened there were no more loud bangs. Nevertheless, I was rather glad when soon after we were called back to the ship.

**Steve Copsey**

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#### **4. HMS Edinburgh - Second Gulf War, March 2003**

##### **CPO Steve Copsey, Electronics Maintainer**

We were due to go to action stations at 2100 and during the afternoon there were a few last-minute preps to be done by all sections. One of these was gun function tests for the 4.5" gun and the close-range batteries. If memory serves it was due to start at 14:00, and the whole of the upper deck was out of bounds. Around 13:55, I heard the pipe "CPO Copsey, bridge!" I was External Communications Chief, so I immediately thought the worst: Bloody hell, one of the tactical circuits has gone down just before the serial start (not to mention a few hours before we go to action stations), and the Ops Room and Skipper will be going barmy.

I raced up to the bridge expecting to be met by a sea of stern faces. Instead, as I flipped the wooden hatch and asked for permission to come onto the bridge, the Chief Yeoman called me over urgently. I raced across to him and asked what the defect was. "There's no defect Steve", he said, "I think there's a Hoopoe hopping around on the fo'c'sle". I kept one eye on the skipper to make sure he wasn't looking too keenly in my direction and then picked up a pair of binoculars to have a good look and sure enough there was indeed a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* hopping around right next to the 4.5 inch gun. It stayed for a while, and then made its way aft unconcernedly down the starboard passage - a good move, because a few moments later the 4.5 opened up.

**Steve Copsey**

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**Plate 44.** HMS *Scott*, dressed overall to celebrate the Queen's birthday, off the Devon coast. © E Woollcott

## Report from HMS *Scott*

by Lieutenant Philip Boak RN

I have the privilege to compile this report from HMS *Scott*, the Royal Navy's only deep-sea survey vessel. She displaces some 13,500 tons, making her the largest survey vessel in Western Europe and actually the fifth largest vessel in the Royal Navy. Survey ships are required as part of their business to report sightings of seabirds and other wildlife, and these can contribute to the RNBWS database when the security situation allows. I am keen, as a member of RNBWS and indeed a member of the Committee, to raise the standards of seabird reporting on board, and with several newly signed-up members we are making a start.

The current HMS *Scott* may not resemble a conventional warship. Seventy years ago, survey ships were mostly converted corvettes and frigates (indeed, the previous HMS *Scott* was a Halcyon-Class minesweeper, serving with distinction as a survey vessel during WW2), but today they are designed for their specialist hydrographic role, and built largely to merchant ship standards. Nevertheless, we are still an integral part of the Navy, are organised like any other RN ship, and are still likely to be sent anywhere at short notice in support of this country's interests.

Thus it was that we were taken from our survey duties and despatched post haste from Gibraltar in November 2019 to take on the role of South Atlantic Island Patrol Vessel, based in the Falklands. Our passage south was straightforward enough, with a welcome visit to Rio De Janiero en route. However, as the ship neared the Falkland Islands we were diverted to join the multi-national search for a Chilean C-130 aircraft that had gone missing in Drake Passage. That meant a number of long and hard days collecting debris and surveying the area before heading for Punta Arenas for a short pit-stop and passage east to our Falkland Islands base.

Our Patrol Ship role meant a lot of time at sea, but fortunately we were able to anchor for a bit of relaxation for two days at Christmas and New Year. We finally handed over the South Atlantic task to HMS *Forth* and set off in late February for the long passage north for a maintenance period. This was originally planned to be carried out in the USA but the decision was made to return to the UK and get it done in Falmouth.

## Wildlife of the Falklands

The Sovereignty Patrol of the South Atlantic Islands gave us plenty of opportunities to see the special flora and fauna of the Falklands, and many of these were captured by *Scott's* informal photographer Able Seaman Dan Sommerville.

Leading Writer Kaleigh Horrell wrote her of her experience in the islands: *Scott was directed to the southern hemisphere in order to conduct Sovereignty Patrol of the South Atlantic Islands. This part of the world was new for many of the ship's company, including me. The Falkland Islands was never on my bucket list of countries to visit but I was grateful for the opportunity to say I had been there, considering the effect the Falklands conflict had on our Navy as it is today.*

*As part of Three-watch manning, our watch was due to fly home for some much-needed respite. However, the plane home was delayed by 24 hours, so a few of us took the opportunity to visit the penguins on Bertha's Beach.*

*After a bumpy Land Rover journey, we set off on foot in search of the penguins. It seemed we were walking for ages before we could see them in the distance. Next, we were hit by the smell, but that didn't put us off wanting to get closer to these beautiful creatures. The beach is home to Gentoo Penguins, and we were lucky enough to be able to see many new-born chicks being cared for by their parents. We were careful not to get too close to the birds and we all realised how privileged we were to have seen penguins in their natural habitat.*



**Plate 45 (above).** Bird in a hurry; Gentoo colony. © *D Sommerville* **Plate 46 (opposite).** a. Giant Petrel. b. Patagonian Crested Ducks. c. Kelp Geese. d. Falkland Pipit. e. Long-tailed Meadowlark. f. King Penguin. g. Gentoo Penguin. h. Magellanic Penguin © *D Sommerville*



a)



b)



c)



d)



e)



f)



g)



h)



Plate 47. HMS Scott at anchor in Falkland Islands. © D Somerville

## MDG

After a short maintenance period in Falmouth, *Scott* sailed to get on with her real job, which is termed Military Data Gathering (MDG). This involved a six-week stint at sea, which gives ample opportunity to observe wildlife, this time in the oceans of the northern hemisphere. Most animals were very much at home in the maritime environment, including whales, dolphins and seabirds. However, one of the few land birds that made an appearance onboard was a rather lost Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, which had presumably been blown from its usual migration routes. Lt Josh Tyrie remarked, “*is it just me, or does that bird have absolutely no business being this far out at sea?*”

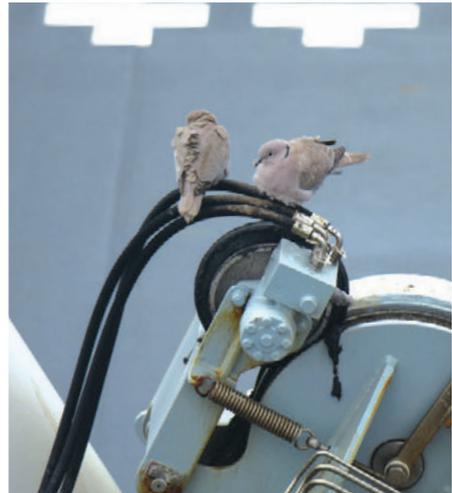


Plate 48–49. (left) Common Quail (right) and Collared Doves, on board, North Atlantic. © P Boak

a)



**Plate 50 a.** Rockall.  
**b.** Fulmar, North Atlantic.  
 © P Boak

## Rockall

During this summer 2020 tasking period, *Scott* sailed past Rockall, giving us the chance to see this unusual outpost of the British Isles at close range. Rockall is an uninhabitable granite islet, located some 200nm west of the Outer Hebrides. It was claimed by the UK in 1955, and incorporated as a part of Scotland in 1972. Variousy described as ‘desolate’, ‘despairing’ and ‘awful’, the islet is unable to sustain human life (although someone did spend 45 days there). But there is plenty of bird life and as we passed close by we could see many Northern Gannets *Morus bassanus* on the rock, and a considerable number of Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* in the adjacent seas.

## The future

I am compiling this report in June 2020 in order to meet the *Sea Swallow* deadline. Beyond this, the ship’s operational programme is set out for the rest of the year, but life at sea in the Navy being what it is, no doubt it will change!

**Philip Boak**

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**Plate 51.** Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

## **Pelagic boat trip, Australia**

by Warrant Officer Steve Copsey

*(All photographs by the author)*

The Three Amigos (Copsey, Cutts, Tindale) had a splendid visit to Oz, staying with Neil Cheshire and achieving some very good birding (see our blog at <http://www.surfbirds.com/community-blogs/amigo/>). However, our plans for pelagic trips were dashed by bad weather, and it was not until later in the trip, when Tony Tindale had flown home, that Mark Cutts and I managed to get one day at sea, off Southport on the coast of Queensland, on 9 November 2019.

The weather did not seem too bad but there was quite a strong breeze from the south, so when we mustered on the quayside at 05:30 we were a little apprehensive that we might lose out again, but fortunately the new boat used for the Southport pelagics, *Grinner 2*, was more than capable of handling the conditions (the chaps onboard said the trip would have been cancelled in the old boat, replaced just a few months earlier).

We sailed just before 06:00 and turned out through the seaway into a 20-knot breeze. By the time we passed the 60-fathom mark the wind was gusting up to 32 knots, and I was rather glad we had the bigger boat. Conditions were indeed choppy with a 2.5 to 3 metre swell and the skipper had the boat in hand for the entire passage; no autopilot in these conditions. Because of the weather, it was decided that we would start the drift earlier than planned as a few foraging birds had already been seen, and so it was we started to drift at the 130-fathom mark. The skipper now opened the barrels of berley, which I believe was a shark's liver mix, and after what seemed no time at all we had good numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters *Puffinus pacificus* dropping onto the slick. This species was expected to be the most numerous of the trip so it was no surprise they were first in to the offerings. They were soon followed by Short-tailed Shearwaters *P. tenuirostris* and smaller numbers of Flesh-footed Shearwaters *P. careneipes*, as well as a small number of Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata*, along with the commoner Crested Terns *S. bergii*. After an hour or so the first Wilson's Storm Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* arrived and the first of four Tahiti Petrels *Pterodroma rostrata* made an entrance, a new bird for the both of us. Things were going well. The interest level then edged up a fraction as the only Providence Petrel *P. solandri* of the trip came in to see what all the commotion was about. Unfortunately, the visit was brief and it soon departed, not to be seen again.

At about 12:20 the skipper was just about to call time when an all dark petrel appeared above the boat. The call "Black Petrel!" *Procellaria parkinsoni* went up and thankfully this bird did stay around and readily came into the slick, bullying the smaller shearwaters out of the way as it did so. After that we headed back in the direction of the Gold Coast, picking up a single Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* and two Pomarine Skuas *S. pomarinus* as we motored back.

A great birding session in the company of some very good sea birders.

**Steve Copsey**

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**Plate 52 a.** Flesh-footed Shearwater. **b.** Tahiti Petrel.  
**c.** Black Petrel. **d.** Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

*Sea Swallow 69 (2020)*





**Plate 53.** Sea Lions and Imperial Cormorants, Beagle Channel, 19 March 2020.

## **Penguins to Puffins - the 'Corona cruise'**

by Simon Cook

*(All photographs by the author)*

In early 2020 the ice-strengthened MV *Ortelius*, of Oceanwide Expeditions, was sailing towards southern Argentina from New Zealand, via the Ross Sea. During the month-long voyage, the Corona virus had taken hold worldwide and life was becoming more and more uncertain. Although we were allowed to dock in the port of Ushuaia no-one was allowed to disembark.

The local authorities had decreed that people could only disembark from ships that they deemed to have been solely in Argentine territorial waters i.e. the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula. Far-off New Zealand was 'foreign' so we were all trapped on the ship, and having been allowed to refuel and re-provision, *Ortelius* left Ushuaia on 19 March without having a port to sail to. Words cannot adequately describe the worry, uncertainty, stress and fear caused by this situation, like a disaster movie that no-one had ever seen before.

After a huge amount of behind-the-scenes negotiating, Montevideo, across the River Plate from Buenos Aires, let us dock for three days, 25–27 March. On the way there all of the passengers managed to re-arrange their flights and were bussed to the airport along a 'sanitary corridor' - gloves, masks, staying apart, police escort etcetera. Only those people due to fly were allowed off the ship. My staff colleagues and I were given the choice of either leaving or staying; some left whilst others, including me, stayed. The subsequent long voyage to Holland, accompanied by another of the company's ships, MV *Plancius*, was like an extended version of the company's familiar 'Atlantic Odyssey' but without the island stops.

Our route took us from Ushuaia to Montevideo, and thence via easternmost Brazil, west of the Cape Verde Islands, Canary islands and Madeira, then the Bay of Biscay to the English Channel and Hansweert, Holland.

Birding from ships in ports like Ushuaia is not always exciting so I was delighted to see a Chimango Caracara on the netting around the helideck one morning - new for my 'on-board' list. On the way down the Beagle Channel on 19 March our Chilean friends were finally allowed to fly off their three helicopters to 'closed-to-normal-business' Puerto Williams. The channel is rich in wildlife so we saw numerous Black-browed Albatross, hundreds of South American Terns and South American Sea Lions and thousands of both Imperial Cormorants and Sooty Shearwaters. There was also the Rock Shag and Magellanic Penguin colony to see and the first of over 20 species of cetaceans appeared, in the form of leaping Peale's Dolphins.

### **Ushuaia to Montevideo**

My days at sea were largely ruled by the number of hours of daylight available for sea watching. In the latter part of the voyage I settled into two watches a day - generally 08.00–12.00 and 13.00–19.00. On the one day during the latter part of the voyage that I did an after-dinner watch, I saw the only White-faced Storm-petrel of the voyage

The five days to Montevideo were very productive for both birds and mammals. The latter included more Peale's and four Dusky dolphins, one Humpback Whale, three Killer whales (at a kill), four Southern Right whales and nine Sei whales. Birds were plentiful and varied, with tubenoses predominating. The most impressive were the albatrosses, six species of which were seen. In addition to 'local' Black-browed there were both kinds of Royal Albatross (from New Zealand), Atlantic Yellow-nosed (from the Tristan da Cunha group), Snowy Wandering Albatross (possibly from South Georgia) and one of New Zealand's Shy Albatross species. Other exciting species included Magellanic Penguins, Magellanic Diving-petrel, White-chinned Petrel, Grey-backed Storm-petrel (one of my favourite birds), Sooty, Great, Manx and Cory's Shearwaters, Atlantic Petrel, and northbound Arctic, Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas.

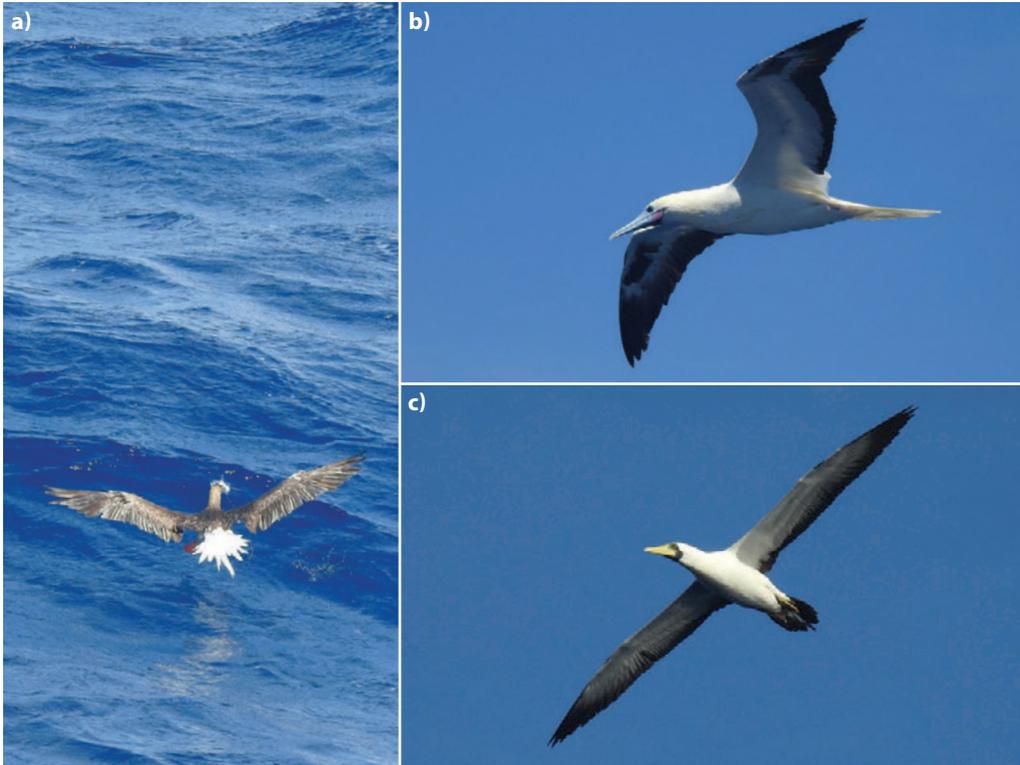


**Plate 54 a–b.** Black-browed Albatross and tail flukes of Southern Right Whale, off Argentina, 22 March 2020. **c.** Atlantic Petrel off southern Brazil, 30 March 2020.

## Montevideo northwards

The best bird in Montevideo was a male Peregrine, seen on two days. It did not seem to like the other birds much and chased both pigeons and Southern Crested Caracaras with vigour. During the evening of 27 March *Ortelius* and *Plancius* left the dock for the 6,309 nautical mile/27-day voyage to Holland. This would see us crossing the equator after paying due homage to King Neptune. I thought the area around the equator would be a 'bird free zone' but it came much sooner - off central Brazil. On 1 April I saw only two birds, one of which was a Barn Swallow; on the 2nd there were no birds at all and on the 3rd there were just three unidentifiable birds, plus singles of Manx and Cory's Shearwater. This was in 26½ hours of watching!

Having left Uruguay I thought that there would be no chance of seeing Spectacled Petrel but they appeared shortly afterwards on three consecutive days. Around their breeding grounds on the Tristan group they frequently follow ships but these birds tended to keep their distance. With the ship now in the tropics, boobies started to appear. There was just one Masked but several Red-footed, of both the brown and black-and-white forms. All of these birds kept station around the bow, waiting for flying fish to be flushed. Many were energetically chased and some were caught and swallowed. I first saw the Masked Booby on the television in my cabin, on the bow camera channel. Further north we were attended by Northern Gannets, which gave excellent views as they too kept station at the bow. There were lots of other things to look out for and non-birds/mammals popped up every now and then: turtles, Portuguese Man-of-war jellyfish, flying squid, moths and a large swordfish, possibly an Atlantic Blue Marlin.



**Plate 55 a.** Red-footed Booby with flying fish between Brazil and the Cape Verde Islands. **b.** Red-footed Booby off northern Brazil. **c.** Masked Booby off northern Brazil, 5 April 2020.



**Plate 56 a.** Fea's Petrel. **b.** Bulwer's Petrel. **c.** Wilson's Storm-petrels. **d.** Band-rumped Storm-petrel sp.

Trindade Petrel were seen off Brazil on just one day and other sightings, further north, included Red-billed Tropicbird, Sooty Tern, Bulwer's Petrel, Cape Verde and Boyd's Shearwater, Fea's Petrel, Arctic Tern and just one grey Grey Phalarope. I saw just one Frigatebird, just after daybreak on 7 April. I had just emerged onto deck when, looking up, I saw it flying from above the ship and out over the water. I was sure that it had come off the mast and droppings on the deck below it seemed to confirm my suspicion. I only got a brief look at it before it flew off to the southeast but from an awful picture I thought that it might have been a female Ascension Frigatebird. At this point the ship was 290 nautical miles off eastern Brazil. One of the best sightings during this period was of a flock of 16 superb Pomarine Skuas, most of which had the distinctive, spoon-like tail feathers.

Wilson's Storm-petrels are always a delight to see and off Uruguay I saw a flock of about 70 feeding at an oil slick; presumably from a dead fish, seal or cetacean. Other species of 'stormy' appeared too: Leach's, British, Cape Verde, Madeiran/Grant's and White-faced/Cramp's Storm-petrel. This last species was a big surprise because it was the only one of the voyage and was off central Portugal. It was seen during my first and only after-dinner watch - after that I retired while I was at the top!



**Plate 57.** Flock of Pomarine Skuas, en route to Madeira, 15 April 2020.



**Plate 58.** Sperm Whales in waters 4,923 metres deep, off northern Brazil, 5 April 2020.

### Sightings of cetaceans

Cetaceans were seen throughout the voyage, which was probably my best-ever for whales and dolphins. The ship's cut-away, ice-breaking bow was not very good for creating a pressure wave for dolphins to ride on so most that came to the ship stayed for only a very short time. Nevertheless, in addition to Peale's and Dusky (and Killer Whale, the largest of the dolphins), a further ten species were recorded: both Short and Long-finned Pilot whales plus Rough-toothed, Common Bottlenose, Pantropical Spotted, Atlantic Spotted, Spinner (Gray's), Clymene, Striped and Short-beaked Common dolphins.

Larger cetaceans were evident too, varying in size from beaked whales to Fin Whale and the largest of all, Blue Whale. Sperm Whales are always impressive and they were seen on five different days. The best encounter was off northern Brazil on the 5th April, in water that was nearly 5,000 metres deep. I spotted blows, the captain was called and we slowed and turned the ship. Eventually we had several members of a pod of eleven right beside us, logging at the surface. The *Plancius* was just ahead of us so we called them on the radio and they came and had a look too. On one day when the sea was like glass I saw something very small that I can only imagine was a young Pygmy or Dwarf Sperm Whale. Beaked whales are the least-known large animals on the planet. Normally inhabiting deep water, they lead a 'vertical' life, spending nearly all their lives underwater, diving deep, surfacing to breathe and diving again. Normally undemonstrative, they can be hard to spot unless they happen to surface close by and when they are close they often hurry past or crash-dive to get away.

Perhaps the most widespread species is the pale-headed, brown, (sometimes chestnut-bodied) Cuvier's Beaked Whale. I had two sightings, on 14 and 18 April, south of the Canary Islands and off southern Portugal. The first one was my best-ever encounter, as the animal was close and, for a beaked whale, the views were prolonged. At close range the low, bushy spouts can be seen and I saw eight before the whale was left behind us. The second sighting involved two animals but they were not seen either as close or for as long.

In between these sightings, on 17 April, north of Madeira, came an even better beaked whale. Over the 2,000-metre contour at the southern edge of Dragon Bank four 'beakers' appeared ahead of the ship. I very quickly rattled off some photographs through the bridge window before watching them pass down the starboard side and away from the ship. From what I had seen I could narrow them down to two species - True's or Gervais'. When I zoomed in on my pictures I couldn't believe my luck. I had got an adult male with an eruptive tooth partway down the beak - Gervais' Beaked Whale. The marine mammal book on the bridge said, "They have only sometimes been reliably identified in the wild, mostly in the eastern Atlantic". Very, very exciting!



**Plate 59.** Very rarely seen Gervais Beaked Whales.

### **Western Approaches**

The run up the channel to Holland provided the last new birds of the trip. Southern Fulmar had been seen in the Beagle Channel; now Northern Fulmar appeared in the English Channel. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were common, Black-legged Kittiwake and Great Skua less so. Closer to Holland, it was a thrill to see a couple of Mediterranean Gulls and several Little Gulls, all in breeding plumage. Finally, from albatrosses to auks and penguins to puffins! One or two Razorbills and a few Common guillemots were noted, along with just two Atlantic Puffins, flapping away at high speed.



**Plate 60.** Great Skua, English Channel, 21 April 2020.



**Plate 61.** Northern Gannet, English Channel, 21 April 2020.

## Landbirds

I am always on the lookout for landbirds at sea and was hoping to see some migrants on the ship. That was not to be but a Buff-winged Cinclodes spent 20 minutes on the helideck one afternoon. We were off northern Argentina and the bird scooped up dead moths that had arrived the night before. Off Brazil, an Eared Dove landed on the ship but Barn Swallows, a Common Starling and four Cattle Egrets were content with flying around it. Whimbrel were seen off Portugal and in the Bay of Biscay and other northbound species were spotted in the Channel: Eurasian Oystercatcher, Barn Swallows, Sand and Common House Martins, unidentifiable warblers and a Common Cuckoo. However, there was disappointingly 'one that got away'; quite bizarrely, off Uruguay or southern Brazil a Common Potoo was seen on board. It was photographed by a deckhand but he didn't tell me until several days later.



**Plate 62–63.** (left) Buff-winged Cinclodes on the helideck, off northern Argentina, 23 March 2020. (right) Western Cattle Egrets off southern Brazil, 30 March 2020.

So, to summarise an extraordinary trip, by the time that I got off the ship in Holland I had seen a huge variety of wildlife, had been away for an unexpected 3½ months, had been aboard continuously for 53 days (since Capt. Scott's hut on 2 March!), had crossed the Antarctic Circle four times, had crossed the International Date Line twice, had crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer, had crossed the Greenwich Meridian, had cruised in the eastern, western, southern and northern hemispheres and had steamed a grand total of 20,780 nautical miles. What an adventure!

**Simon Cook**

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**Appendix 1. List of species mentioned.****Birds**

Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*  
 Snowy Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*  
 Southern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*  
 Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*  
 Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*  
 Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchus*  
 Auckland/Tasmanian Shy Albatross *Thalassarche steadi/cauta*  
 Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*  
 Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*  
 Atlantic Petrel *Pterodroma incerta*  
 Trindade Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*  
 Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*  
 White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*  
 Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata*  
 Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*  
 Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis*  
 Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*  
 Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*  
 Boyd's Shearwater *Puffinus boydi*  
 Great Shearwater *Ardenna gravis*  
 Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*  
 Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*  
 Grey-backed Storm-petrel *Garrodia nereis*  
 Leach's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous*  
 British Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*  
 Cape Verde Storm-petrel *Thalobata jabejabe*  
 White-faced/Cramp's Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma hypoleuca*  
 Band-rumped Storm-petrel species *Thalobata sp.*  
 Magellanic Diving-petrel *Pelecanoides magellani*  
 Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*  
 Magnificent/Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens/aquila*  
 Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*  
 Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*  
 Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*  
 Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*  
 Imperial Cormorant *Phalacrocorax atriceps*  
 Rock Shag *Phalacrocorax magellanicus*  
 Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*  
 Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*  
 Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*  
 Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*  
 Great Skua *Catharacta skua*  
 Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*  
 Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*  
 Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*  
 Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*  
 Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*  
 Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*  
 Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*  
 South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea*  
 Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*  
 Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*  
 Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*  
 Razorbill *Alca torda*  
 Eared Dove *Zenaida auriculata*  
 Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*  
 Common Potoo *Nyctibius griseus*  
 Buff-winged Cinclodes *Cinclodes fuscus*  
 Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*  
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*  
 Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*  
 Eurasian Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

**Mammals**

Southern Right Whale *Eubalaena australis*  
 Blue Whale *Balaenoptera musculus*  
 Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus*  
 Sei Whale *Balaenoptera borealis*  
 Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
 Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*  
 Dwarf/Pygmy Sperm Whale *Kogia breviceps/sima*  
 Cuvier's Beaked Whale *Ziphius cavirostris*  
 Gervais' Beaked Whale *Mesoplodon europaeus*  
 Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*  
 Short-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephala macrorhynchus*  
 Long-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephala melas*  
 Rough-toothed Dolphin *Steno bredanensis*  
 Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*  
 Pantropical Spotted Dolphin *Stenella attenuata*  
 Atlantic Spotted Dolphin *Stenella plagiodon*  
 Gray's Spinner Dolphin *Stenella longirostris*  
 Clymene Dolphin *Stenella clymene*  
 Striped Dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*  
 Short-beaked Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis*  
 Dusky Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus obscurus*  
 Peale's Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus australis*  
 South American Sea Lion *Otaria flavescens*

**Others**

Atlantic Blue Marlin *Makaira nigricans*  
 Portuguese Man-of-war *Physalia physalis*



**Plate 64.** Migrating Whimbrel, Bay of Biscay, 20 April 2020.

# Western Pacific odyssey 15 March–14 April 2019

by Dr Nigel Hacking; distinguished radiologist, keen bird  
watcher and RNBWS member

(All photographs by the author)

This was a journey I took with my friend and fellow RNBWS member, Dr Phil Agland.

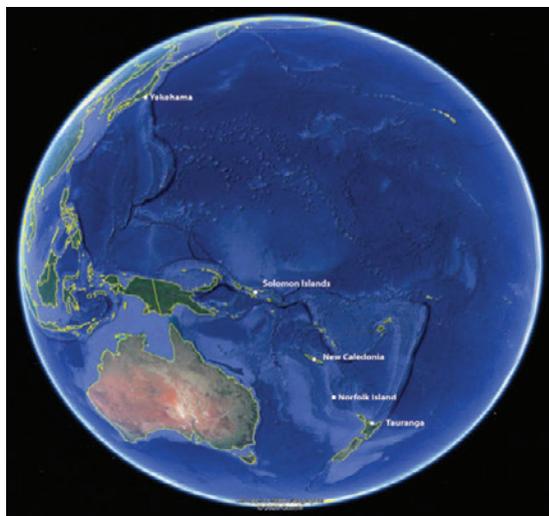


Figure 1. Pacific Odyssey.

The trip was booked through Wildwings and World Heritage Expeditions on the polar expedition ship, the MV *Spirit of Enderby* (aka *Professor Khronov*), and it involved a month-long cruise for 50 British and Zealand passengers north from Tauranga in New Zealand to Yokohama in Japan.

Most of us were keen sea-birders and photographers with an average world bird list of around 6000 species. In addition to the amazing variety of rare and little known seabirds there were visits to Norfolk Island, New Caledonia and five full days of land birding in the Solomon Islands, and my overall bird list was 250 species.

Cetaceans also featured, with 23 species recorded. A pod of Deraniyagala's Beaked Whales were among the first ever seen and photographed at sea. A very close mother and calf Omura's Whale, and a similar mother and calf Pygmy Sperm Whale were other highlights.

On our first full day at sea, a fish oil slick in the Hauraki Gulf attracted around a dozen New Zealand Storm-petrels as well as a few White-faced Storm-petrels.



Plate 65. New Zealand and White-faced Storm-petrels. Hauraki Gulf, NZ.

Cookilaria petrels were seen in good numbers with Cook's, Pycroft's and Black-Winged giving way to Gould's, Collared, including the 'Magnificent' form and finally Bonin's as we headed north over the course of the month.



**Plate 66** a. Cook's, b. Pycroft's, c. Black-Winged, d. Gould's, e. 'Magnificent' and f. Bonin Petrels.

The absolute numbers of sea birds reduced in number, but included many poorly known species as we left Norfolk Island waters and headed north first to New Caledonia and then on to the Solomon Islands.

The most unexpected sighting and definitely the most unexpected find of the entire trip was a mystery petrel, possibly a new *Pseudobulweria* species with skua-like flashes in upper and lower wings and very deep wing beats as the first of three individuals seen during a remarkable day took off from just under the bow of the ship, south of Santa Ana in the Solomon Islands on 24 March. (15S, 162.4E). Photos and video were obtained. The birds' moult, their plumage, structure and flight were unlike anything that the very experienced sea-birders and expedition staff had ever seen, but is probably the same species as the single bird seen in 2014 some 300Km east of our position, in the remote Western Pacific north of Vanuatu on a previous Heritage Expeditions trip by one of the staff (Lisle Gwynne).

Lisle described the bird: “*The birds had a relatively uniform dark brown plumage with a substantial bill and distinctive white markings in both the upper and underwing and were structurally different from species such as Kermadec Petrel.*”

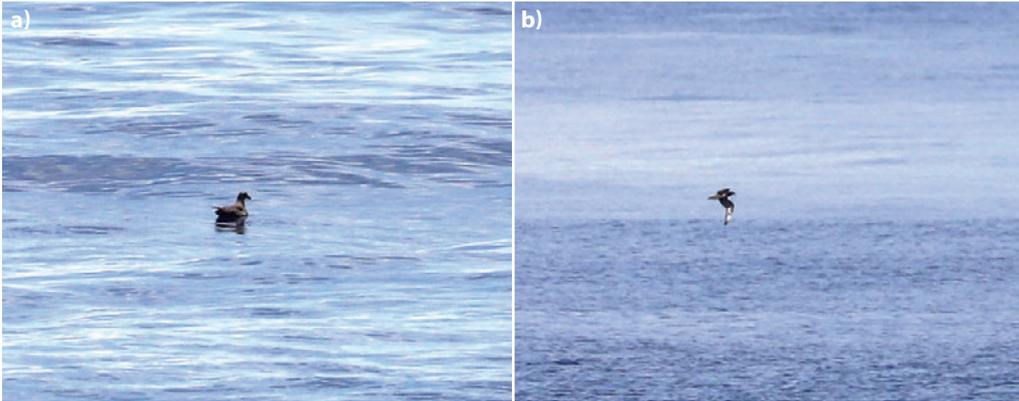


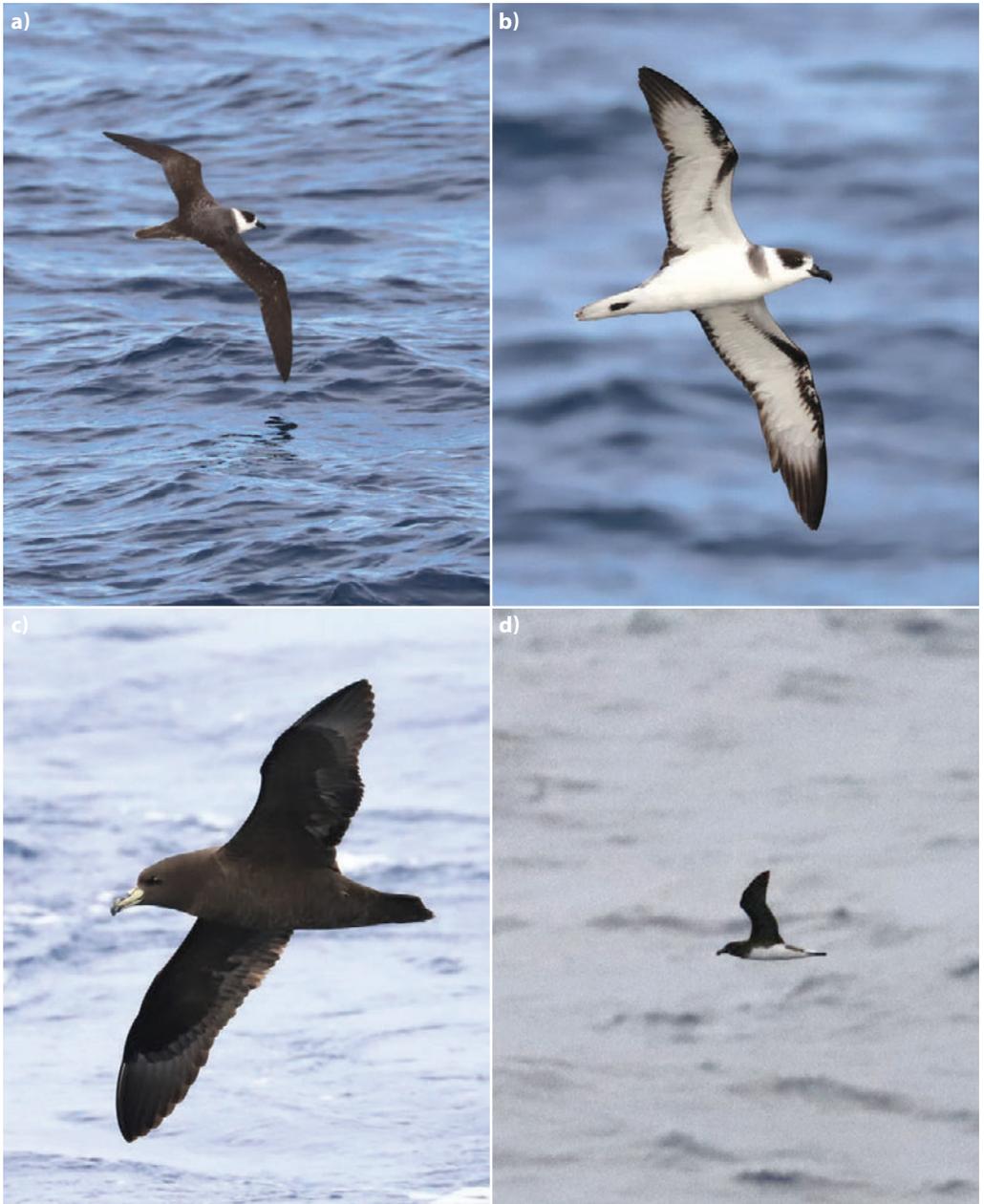
Plate 67 a–b. Unknown Petrel. Nicknamed ‘Obskua’ or ‘Lava’ Petrel.

There were plenty of other, almost mythical, seabirds including Fiji Petrel, Vanuatu Petrel, Beck’s Petrel, ‘New Caledonian Storm-petrel’, ‘Solomons Band-rumped Storm-petrel’, Heinroth’s and Bryan’s Shearwater.

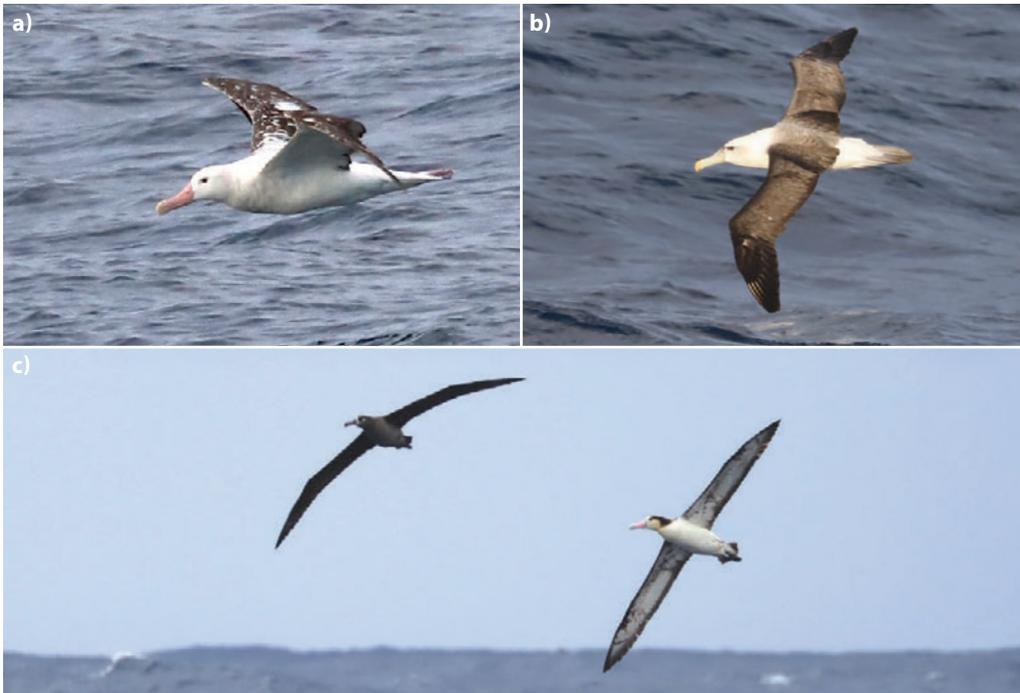


Plates 68 a. New Caledonian and b. Solomon’s Band-rumped Storm-petrels. c. Heinroth’s Shearwater.

There was a supporting cast of White-capped, Gibson's (Antipodean), Northern Royal and all three North Pacific Albatrosses including Short-tailed Albatross, Tristram's Storm-petrel, Matsudaira's Storm-petrel, New Zealand Storm-petrel, Black Petrel, White-necked Petrel, Tahiti Petrel, Collared Petrel, Magnificent Petrel, Buller's, Wedge-tailed, Christmas, Bannerman's and even Bryan's Shearwaters, as well as Japanese Murrelet. During the passage across tropical waters large numbers of boobies, terns and frigatebirds added variety and overall the seabird list was exceptional.



**Plates 69 a–b.** White-necked Petrels, off King's Bank, NZ. **c.** Black (Parkinson's) Petrel and **d.** Tahiti Petrel, between Norfolk Island and New Caledonia.



**Plate 70 a.** Gibson's and **b.** White Capped Albatross, off King's Bank NZ, and **c.** Black-footed and Immature Short-tailed Albatross together at Torishima Island, Japan.

The grand finale, from a sea birding perspective was the permitted close approach to the remote active volcanic island of Torishima (where we saw several hundred Short-tailed Albatross in two of their colonies). The Short-tailed or Steller's Albatross was hunted for its feathers throughout the 19th and early 20th century and was in dire straits when a hunting ban was introduced during the 1930s. It was not further studied for many years once hostilities broke out. It was not found during an American landing expedition to Torishima in 1949 and was declared extinct. In fact 50 or so immatures were out at sea and had survived. After returning to Torishima many years later as adults they laid the first eggs in 1954. Since that time their numbers have increased to an estimated population today of around 5,000. As with all albatross species, longline fishing is a major threat, as is the possibility of a major eruption on its main active volcanic site.



**Plates 71.** Short-tailed or Steller's Albatross, Torishima Island.

Apart from the amazing sea birds and cetaceans many island endemics included all the Norfolk Island extant species and most of the New Caledonian endemics, including the unique Kagu, Crow Honeyeaters, New Caledonian Goshawk and the NC Crow, possibly the most intelligent bird in the world. Many endemic species were seen in the Solomon Islands, although a landing on the endemic rich Rennell Island was cancelled due to a recent 80 tonne oil spillage from the bulk carrier MV *Solomon Trader* in February.



Plate 72 a. Slender-billed White-eye. b. Norfolk Robin. c. Solomon's Cockatoo. d. Kagu.

North of New Caledonia and after three days at sea, we arrived in the Solomon Islands where we enjoyed five consecutive days of landings visiting Santa Ana, Makira, Guadalcanal, Tetepare and Kolombangara. Here a great range of Solomon endemics and other localised species were found including Sanford's Sea-eagle, Ultramarine Kingfisher, Solomon's Cockatoo, several parrot species as well as many endemic Monarch Flycatchers and Cuckoo-shrikes.

The rather intimidating Solomon's welcome on remote islands by spear wielding warriors is in fact a warm and traditional welcome although it may resonate with past indiscretions and a rather primitive cuisine. Once on land these same warriors washed off and welcomed us with open arms. An avenue of beautiful smiling children draped garlands of fresh orchids around our necks and escorted us to a reception area prepared in their village. After we individually introduced ourselves to the gathered village elders, watched by the entire village and their children we listened to welcoming speeches and were entertained by the village's female choir with traditional songs.



**Plate 73 a.** A Santa Ana Island welcome in the Makira group in the Eastern Solomon's. **b.** Solomons dugouts. **c.** School supplies and **d.** happy kids.

We came with gifts of school books, chalk and pens and paper and since we were the first vessel to reach them for 3 years these were much appreciated and were carried off by the children to their school rooms.

After a very rewarding visit to the Solomon's we headed north, passing the Cetacean rich seas off Bougainville and New Ireland. Passing through equatorial waters saw a drop in numbers of seabirds and we were entertained in the ship's lecture theatre watching Phil Agland's excellent and very well received recent TV documentary, *China: Between Clouds and Dreams*. This explores the Tibetan plateau, the source of so many of Asia's great rivers and the home of the Snow Leopard. He looks at the fate of the critically endangered migratory Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the perilous position of the riverine Finless Porpoise as well as investigating the effects of pollution from coastal chemical factories on the mudflats and estuaries of the east coast so important for migrating waterbirds.

We were accompanied through the tropics by three species of booby and many species of flying fish. It was fascinating to watch the surface skimming antics of the Red-footed Boobies launching from the superstructure of our vessel to the shallow diving of the Brown and deeper diving of the Masked Boobies. It kept the photographers busy during the long hours of scanning the ocean for tubenoses.

After a further five days at sea the next landings of the expedition were in Chuuk, in the Federated States of Micronesia. This area is far better known as the wreck-diving capital of the world. On February 17th 1944 US planes attacked and destroyed a whole Japanese Fleet in the shallow waters known as Truk Lagoon. Fifty Japanese ships and a further 250 planes were lost. Divers come from all around the world to dive in the shallow, clear waters surrounding these wrecks.

After seeing the common endemic land birds on the main island of Wena, Phil and I made the long zodiac ride across the huge lagoon to Tol South, and had some great views of the highly localised Chuuk Monarch and Teardrop White-eye.

Celebrations, including fizz for all on board MV *Spirit of Enderby* after this Zodiac trip were had to celebrate my 5000th world species, the Chuuk Monarch itself, a beautiful pure white and black forest bird.



Plate 74 a. 5000th celebrations. b. Truk Monarch.

## Species/Scientific name

After a further six days at sea we arrived in the southern Japanese Bonin Islands surrounded by breaching Humpback Whales. The much awaited landings on HaHa Jima, in the Bonin group and Miyake Jima, north of Torishima were not possible due to rough seas and so several sought-for endemic land birds were missed. We finally arriving at Yokohama and after a few hours birding around the airport departed for home.

This trip is run most years, repositioning the Polar Expedition vessel from Antarctic to Arctic waters and is highly recommended for sea birders, sea bird photographers as well as those interested in Cetaceans.

World Heritage Expeditions run a variety of expertly guided trips throughout the year with many designed for birders.

<https://www.heritage-expeditions.com/destinations/south-pacific-travel/> - trips

**Nigel Hacking**

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Plate 75. Short-tailed Albatross.

### Appendix 1. List of scientific names of species identified.

#### Birds

Bannerman's Shearwater *Puffinus bannermani*  
 Beck's Petrel *Pterodroma becki*  
 Black Petrel *Procellaria parkinsoni*  
 Black-winged Petrel *Pterodroma nigripennis*  
 Black-footed Albatross *Diomedea nigripes*  
 Bonin's Petrel *Pterodroma hypoleuca*  
 Bryan's Shearwater *Puffinus bryani*  
 Buller's Shearwater *Puffinus bulleri*  
 Christmas Shearwater *Puffinus nativitatis*  
 Collared Petrel *Pterodroma brevipes*  
 Cook's Petrel *Pterodroma cookii*  
 Fiji Petrel *Pterodroma macgillivrayi*  
 Gibson's (Antipodean) Albatross *Diomedea antipodensis gibsoni*  
 Heinroth's Shearwater *Puffinus heinrothi*  
 Magnificent Petrel *Pterodroma (brevis) magnificens*  
 Matsudaira's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma matsudairae*  
 New Zealand Storm-petrel *Fregatta maoriana*  
 Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*  
 Pycroft's Petrel *Pterodroma pycrofti*  
 Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*

Solomons Band-rumped Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma castro*  
 Tahiti Petrel *Pterodroma rostrata*  
 Tristram's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma tristrami*  
 Vanuatu Petrel *Pterodroma reculta*  
 Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica*  
 White-capped Albatross *Diomedea cauta cauta*  
 White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina*  
 White-necked Petrel *Pterodroma cervicalis*  
 Chuuk Monarch *Metabolus rugensis*  
 Crow Honey-eater *Gymnomyza aubryana*  
 Kagu *Rhynochetus jubatus*  
 New Caledonian Crow *Corvus moneduloides*  
 New Caledonian Goshawk *Accipiter efficax*  
 Norfolk Robin *Petroica multicolor multicolour*  
 Sandford's Sea Eagle *Haliastur sanfordi*  
 Slender-billed white-eye *Zosterops tenuirostris*  
 Solomons Cockatoo *Cacatue ducorpsii*  
 Ultramarine Kingfisher *Todiramphus leucopygius*

#### Mammals

Deraniyagala's Beaked Whale *Mesoplodon hotaula*  
 Omura's Whale *Balaenoptera omurai*  
 Pygmy Sperm Whale *Kogia breviceps*



**Plate 76.** Our furthest South, beside the Ross Ice Shelf, Bay of Whales, Ross Sea.

## The Ross Sea and New Zealand islands cruise

by Simon Cook

*(All photographs by the author)*

In early 2020 the ice-strengthened *MV Ortelius* of Oceanwide Expeditions paid two visits to the Ross Sea and a few of New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands. I joined the ship in Ushuaia, Argentina on 13 January and a short stop was made at Puerto Williams, on the Chilean side of the Beagle Channel, to pick up three helicopters and their pilots and mechanics. Then it was off across the Drake Passage for a quick stop on the Antarctic Peninsula (a legal wedding on the bow in the stunning Lemaire Channel) and, very close to our Zodiacs, Humpback whales. At remote and rarely-visited Peter I Island the weather was superb so we took everyone on a scenic flight. It was the first time that I had seen Southern Fulmars and Snow Petrels (they were either Greater or Lesser) from the air.

On the way to the Ross Sea more humpbacks were seen, as well as numerous Antarctic Petrels, a flock of c. 1,000 Blue Petrels and 20 Mottled Petrels. Pack ice was encountered on 24 January and standing and tobogganing on one piece was our first Emperor Penguin. At lunchtime a helicopter went up to find the best way through the ice. Our destination was the famous Bay of Whales and it took another two days to get there. By now the number and variety of birds had decreased noticeably but Snow Petrels made their appearance and there were more Emperors and Antarctic Petrels too. Killer Whales proved to be a highlight. The first pack (of about 10 animals) was busy killing and eating an Antarctic Minke Whale and the second pack (tens of them) was travelling fast and purposefully.

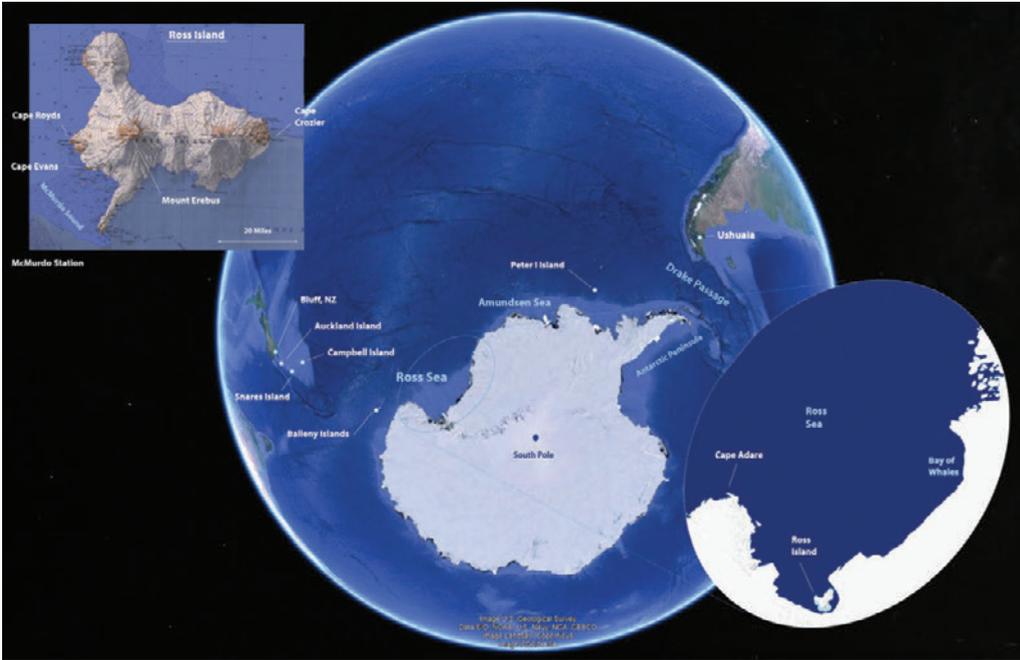


Figure 1. Map showing the Ross Sea and New Zealand islands.

Our furthest south and the furthest south possible in the world for a ship (this year), was in the Bay of Whales, up against the hundred-foot mighty Ross Ice Shelf, in position 78.5°S, 164.6°W. I even saw some birds here: one South Polar Skua, two Southern Giant-Petrels and 14 Snow petrels. As we left for Ross Island the white ‘cliffs’ stretched from horizon to horizon - an awe-inspiring sight. The weather at Cape Crozier was not good enough for helicopter operations so we continued to Cape Evans. This is the location of Captain Scott’s *Terra Nova* hut and we were fortunate in being able to land and go inside it. To be there sent a tingle down my spine; the highlight was seeing the famous Emperor Penguin skin on the table in Scott’s cubicle.



Plate 77. Captain Scott’s *Terra Nova* Hut, and *MV Ortelius*, Cape Evans, Ross Island, Ross Sea.

Our days in the McMurdo Sound area were full, varied and exciting. Down at the southern end there was still a lot of fast ice from the previous winter and a path had been cut through it to McMurdo Station, the large US base. The venerable USCG icebreaker *Polar Star*, was on station; it is not often these days that a vessel with two funnels is seen. One freighter was unloading supplies and another was standing by, wedged into the ice. Scott’s *Discovery* hut was,



**Plate 78.** Interior of Captain Scott's Terra Nova Hut, Cape Evans, Ross Island.

incongruously, adjacent to the base and we saw Shackleton's hut at nearby Cape Royds too. Unfortunately, there was either too much wind or too much ice at the Cape so we never got to that hut at all. Dominating everything was the towering, ice-clad bulk of Mount Erebus. A small plume of smoke could often be seen rising from the crater, 12,448ft above sea level. Just five species of birds were seen down here: a few Adelie Penguins, more Emperors, South Polar Skua, Snow Petrel (presumed Lesser) and Southern Giant Petrel. Even though a colleague and I spent hours and hours looking for Ross Seal we never did manage to find one. Crabbeater, Weddell and Leopard seals were spotted though. I had better luck with my other target species - Ross Sea Killer Whale, or type C. This small variety, with its small pale eye patch was observed on several different occasions, mostly hunting along the ice edge. The Emperor Penguins looked decidedly nervous.

When the weather was kind to us we managed to visit the Adelie Penguin colony at Cape Bird, make a helicopter landing in Taylor Valley, one of the Dry Valleys, do a scenic flight over Cape Hallett and its Adelie colony and land at Borchgrevink's hut at Cape Adare - the oldest building in Antarctica. While the ship was in pack ice for the Cape Hallett operation, due to the current she drifted an astonishing 7 nautical miles. Our next destination was the hardly-ever seen and rarely-visited Balleny Islands. On the way we saw yet



**Plate 79.** Carsten Borchgrevik's hut. He was the leader of the British Antarctic Southern Cross Expedition 1898-1900.



another type of Killer Whale, Antarctic type A. The best bird was Greater Snow Petrel, several of which behaved more like Cape petrels when wheeling round and round the ship. One even nearly landed on a persons' head, down on the bow and a little later, the same bird landed briefly on the bow rail. The highlight of a Zodiac cruise at the islands was Chinstrap Penguin. There were many more Adelie Penguins, many of them were large chicks and there was a marauding and ever-watchful Leopard Seal close by.

It took several days to reach Campbell Island but the journey was far from uneventful. I was looking forward to a change of species and was pleased to record Light-mantled, Auckland Shy and Campbell Albatross, Northern Giant-Petrel, White-chinned, Grey, White-headed and Soft-plumaged Petrel and Subantarctic Shearwater. The most astonishing sight was a group of c. 10,000 feeding Sooty Shearwaters that were in company with six Humpback whales. Disappointingly, the New Zealand authorities refused permission for us to land on Campbell, even though they expected us to pick up some of their stranded personnel. We were able to do a couple of Zodiac cruises though. The first was near the large Campbell Albatross colony at North Cape, where I made a point of driving around Cook Point. Our other cruise was in Perseverance Harbour, where there were distant Eastern Rockhopper penguins and closer Yellow-eyed Penguins. The star bird was Campbell Teal - endemic and flightless.

Our next call was at the heavily wooded Snares Islands, home to two million Sooty shearwaters and many other birds too. On the way the only Westland Petrel of the two trips was seen. We arrived at the Snares during dinner on 13 February and the sky above the islands was full of shearwaters - a remarkable sight. Our morning Zodiac cruise along the east coast of North East Island can only be described as fantastic. Among many highlights were Hooker's Sea Lion, NZ Fur Seal, hundreds of Diving Petrels, several not-at-all-shy Auckland Shy Albatrosses, some of which came right up to my Zodiac, nesting and equally curious Southern Buller's Albatross, Snares Tomtit, Snares Island Fernbird and thousands of the endemic penguin - Snares Crested. There was even a wayward Canada Goose!

From here it was only a short distance to Bluff, at the tip of South Island, where we changed passengers. Because of the spreading Corona virus some people from China had been told that they could not board the ship. Our first stop, on the journey back to Ushuaia, was at the northern end of Auckland Island. We arrived at Port Ross on the evening of 17 April and I found some birds on the blacked-out ship during the night. There were 14 Common Diving-Petrels, one Antarctic Prion, one wet-so-boxed Grey-backed Storm-petrel and, best of all, two White-headed Petrels. One was boxed and released the next morning. A slightly drizzly Zodiac cruise revealed Auckland Shag, Auckland Tomtit, Tui, Bellbird, New Zealand Pipit and Red-crowned Parakeet. Further south, in Carnley Harbour, there were some Gibson's Wandering Albatross on the water, among Southern Royal and a few Auckland Shy Albatross.

This time we were allowed ashore at Campbell Island, at the former met station. From here a long, narrow boardwalk leads up to a high ridge, where Southern Royal Albatross nest. During my first visit, in 1995, the weather had been clear but this time there was heavy, penetrating drizzle; all the way up and all the way down. However, the albatrosses were superb, with at least two with eggs that were hatching. Some

**Plate 80 (opposite) a–b.** Southern Royal Albatross, Campbell Island. **c–d.** Southern Buller's Albatross, Snares Islands. **e.** Campbell Teal, Campbell Island. **f.** Snares Crested Penguins, Snares Islands. **g.** Snares Tomtit, Snares Islands. **h.** Ross Sea Killer Whales Type C.

people were especially lucky, seeing either the endemic New Zealand Snipe or a close Yellow-eyed Penguin. I contented myself with the albatrosses and both close and prolonged views of an obliging Campbell Teal.

Our itinerary was now similar to the outbound voyage and on the way to the Balleny Islands I spotted and identified a Blue Whale. Our official NZ observer had just started a talk in the bar when I rushed in and grabbed the mike, and when I said that there was a Blue Whale outside, the room emptied even more quickly than at the end of one of my lectures! The weather was good again so we went out once more in the boats, seeing a Humpback Whale surface just a few feet from me, c.100 feeding Wilson's Storm-petrels and discovering an immature King Penguin, presumably ashore to moult, and possibly from Macquarie Island, 900 nm away. After leaving the islands we came across a logging Sperm Whale (ie looking like a floating log, stationary or swimming slowly at the surface whilst re-oxygenating in preparation for the next dive), more Humpbacks, Fin and Sei whales and two more Killer whales.

This time the Ross Sea was a very different place. At Cape Adare there was too much ice along the beach for us to land so we did scenic flights over Robertson Bay and the nearby glaciers instead. To be skimming over crevassed ice fields, twisting and turning around massive ice towers and zipping through ice canyons was akin to being in a James Bond film. However, *Polar Star* and the cargo ships had left, the air temperature was plummeting, the sea was starting to freeze and there was a real sense that the winter was coming fast. A Zodiac cruise at Inexpressible Island enabled a huge Leopard Seal to come and have a close look at my passengers. Across at Cape Evans it was not possible to get off the ship. The air and sea temperatures were, respectively, -13° and -2°C, there was 47 knots of wind and there was ice smoke rising from the sea. At McMurdo we were able to sail in front of the New Zealand's Scott Base because all of the fast ice had been blown out.

At Cape Bird it was far too windy and cold to land and to the south off Ross Island the weather got even worse. Going west enabled us to dodge the wind and fly over miles of pack ice to Taylor Valley. This time the ground was covered with fresh snow. I had previously found that when the ship was in ice during helicopter operations, there was a very good chance that we would be visited by curious Emperor Penguins. They would often surface and dive in open water next to us or come across the ice towards us. The birds were all adults and were resplendent in their new, glossy, post-breeding feathers. Seeing them was a great thrill for everyone.

Despite a stiff wind and air at -12°C we were finally lucky at Cape Evans on 2 March. Everyone went ashore and into the hut, including Dafila Scott, Capt. Scott's granddaughter. The South Polar skuas that I saw here were the palest of all; some had almost white heads and underparts. And then, all of a sudden, that was it - the last time that we were able to get off the ship. In the afternoon, off McMurdo, the air temperature had dropped to -20. The next morning there were 50–60 knots of wind, the decks were still covered with snow and ice and all the windows on the ship were iced up. With the sea freezing rapidly around us we headed off towards the Bay of Whales but the new ice got thicker and thicker. We couldn't get close to the ice shelf at all this time, it was just visible in the distance.

**Plate 81 (opposite)** a. Adelie Penguins on ice, Ross Sea. b. White morph Southern Giant Petrel, off Cape Adare, Ross Sea. c. A very pale South Polat Skua, Cape Evans, Ross Island. d. New Zealand Pipit, Auckland Island. e. Two freshly moulted Emperor Peguins, McMurdo Sound, Ross Sea.



We now had to leave the Ross Sea in order to escape from the clutches of the ice. Our next stops would be Peter 1 Island and the Antarctic Peninsula before docking in Ushuaia for disembarkation and flights home. Re-crossing the International Date Line, we had 4 March twice! Slow progress in Amundsen Sea pack ice cost us two days but the sight of it, plus hundreds of icebergs and wildlife was some compensation. On 7 March, after two days of ice navigation, we were 20 miles further from Peter 1 Island than when we started! There were yet more Killer Whales, lots of Mottled Petrels, our last Emperor Penguin, a couple of White-headed Petrels and another Blue Whale. For the lucky few on the bridge one afternoon there was an excellent sighting of two Southern Bottlenose Whales, which were very close to the ship.



**Plate 82.** *MV Ortelius* in pack ice, Ross Sea.

By now the weather had worsened and the mounting seas had slowed us down even more. Waiting for daylight to see Peter I Island was costly in terms of time but we waited anyway. When it came it was difficult to tell daylight from darkness and we only got a glimpse of part of the island. Now, with the Corona situation getting more and more serious and with bad weather still dogging us, we had no choice but to give up on the Antarctic Peninsula and head straight for Ushuaia. It took five days but there were still birds to look out for so I was kept occupied. I was surprised to find that there were still Grey, Mottled and White-headed petrels to be seen, along with Cape Petrel, Black-browed Albatross, Antarctic Prion and Black-bellied Storm-petrel. In addition to both Royal Albatrosses and Snowy Wandering Albatross there were also four Antipodean Wandering Albatross. These were all excellent birds to end the two Ross Sea trips.



**Plate 83.** Pack ice and Mt Discovery, an old volcano, southern end of McMurdo Sound, Ross Sea.

Ushuaia and ‘civilisation’ were getting closer and closer but the international situation was deteriorating rapidly so it was anyone’s guess as to what would happen when we finally reached Argentina. But what actually happened is, as they say, another story...

**Simon Cook**

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**Appendix 1.** List of species mentioned.

**Birds**

Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes forsteri*  
 King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*  
 Adelie Penguin *Pygoscelis adeliae*  
 Chinstrap Penguin *Pygoscelis antarctica*  
 Eastern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes filholi*  
 Snares Crested Penguin *Eudyptes robustus*  
 Yellow-eyed Penguin *Megadyptes antipodes*  
 Snowy Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*  
 Gibson’s Wandering Albatross *Diomedea gibsoni*  
 Antipodes Wandering Albatross *Diomedea antipodensis*  
 Southern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*  
 Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*  
 Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*  
 Campbell Albatross *Thalassarche impavida*  
 Auckland Shy Albatross *Thalassarche steadi*  
 Southern Buller’s Albatross *Thalassarche bulleri*  
 Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*  
 Cape/Pintado Petrel *Daption capense*  
 Lesser Snow Petrel *Pagodroma nivea*  
 Greater Snow Petrel *Pagodroma confusa*  
 Antarctic Petrel *Thalassoica antarctica*  
 Southern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*  
 Northern Giant Petrel *Macronectes halli*  
 Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*  
 Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea*  
 Antarctic Prion *Pachyptila desolata*  
 White-headed Petrel *Pterodroma lessonoi*  
 Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis*  
 Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata*  
 Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*  
 Subantarctic Shearwater *Puffinus elegans*

Westland Petrel *Procellaria westlandica*  
 White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*  
 Grey Petrel *Procellaria cinerea*  
 Wilson’s Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*  
 Black-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta tropica*  
 Grey-backed Storm-petrel *Garrodia nereis*  
 Common Diving-petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix*  
 Auckland Shag *Leucocarbo colensoi*  
 Campbell Teal *Anas nesiotis*  
 New Zealand Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica*  
 South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki*  
 Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*  
 Red-crowned Parakeet *Cyanoramphus novaeseelandiae*  
 New Zealand Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*  
 Snares Islands Fernbird *Bowdleria caudata*  
 Snares Tomtit *Petroica dannefaerdi*  
 Auckland Islands Tomtit *Petroica marrineri*  
 Tui *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*  
 New Zealand Bellbird *Anthornis melanua*

**Mammals**

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
 Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*  
 Blue Whale *Balaenoptera musculus*  
 Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus*  
 Sei Whale *Balaenoptera borealis*  
 Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*  
 Ross Sea Killer Whale (type C) *Orcinus species*  
 Southern Bottlenose Whale *Hyperoodon planifrons*  
 New Zealand Fur Seal *Arctocephalus forsteri*  
 Hooker’s Sea Lion *Phocarcos hookeri*  
 Crabeater Seal *Lobodon carcinophaga*  
 Weddell Seal *Leptonychotes weddellii*  
 Leopard Seal *Hydrurga leptonyx*

# Robinson Crusoe Islands - a south Chile seabirding voyage, 22 February–11 March 2020

by John Holmes

(All photographs by the author)



Figure 1. Islands voyage.



Plate 84. Yacht Sauvage at anchor.

## The mission

This was a trip on the Expedition Sailing Yacht *Sauvage*, planned and arranged by Kirk Zufelt, author with Steve Howell of *Oceanic Birds of the World* (Reviewed on page 96). We hoped to experience at first-hand the finer points of identification of the ‘Wilson’s Complex’ extended family of Storm-petrels, and to explore the area of the Juan Fernandez Islands for the *pterodroma* petrels that breed there, as well as the local race (*segethi*) of White-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta grallaria*.

Named after the Spanish explorer who sighted them in 1574, the original Spanish names of the two main Juan Fernandez Islands mean “Farther from the mainland” (Mas-a-fuera) and “Closer to the mainland” (Mas-a-tierra). The latter was where Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk was cast away between 1704 and 1709. *Robinson Crusoe* was the novel by Daniel Defoe based on Selkirk’s experiences.

In 1966 the Chilean Government re-branded Mas-a-tierra as Robinson Crusoe Island, and visitors today can get a boat from the main settlement to view the seaside cave in which Selkirk lived. Confusingly, the Chileans also re-named Mas-a-fuera as Alexander Selkirk Island (Isla Alejandro Selkirk), but there is no evidence Selkirk himself was ever there.

The islands are hotbeds of endemic biodiversity, mainly plants but also a few birds as well as the Juan Fernandez Fur Seal *Arctocephalus philippii* which is slowly recovering from near extinction.

## Execution

The usual complement of boat passengers is six, but due to last-minute family issues there were two droppers-out, so the voyagers were Kirk Zufelt, Colin Rogers, Mike Deverell and yours truly.

Usually based in Tahiti, Yacht *Sauvage* is owned and ably crewed by Didier and Sophie Wattrelot, who had



**Plate 85.** Men at work in the cabin. L–R: Didier Wattrelot, Colin Rogers, Mike Deverell.

had a four-week voyage to get to the starting point, Puerto Montt in southern Chile. With participants coming from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and the UK we finally boarded in Puerto Montt on 21 February and sailed the following morning southwards in clear, calm and unusually warm weather.

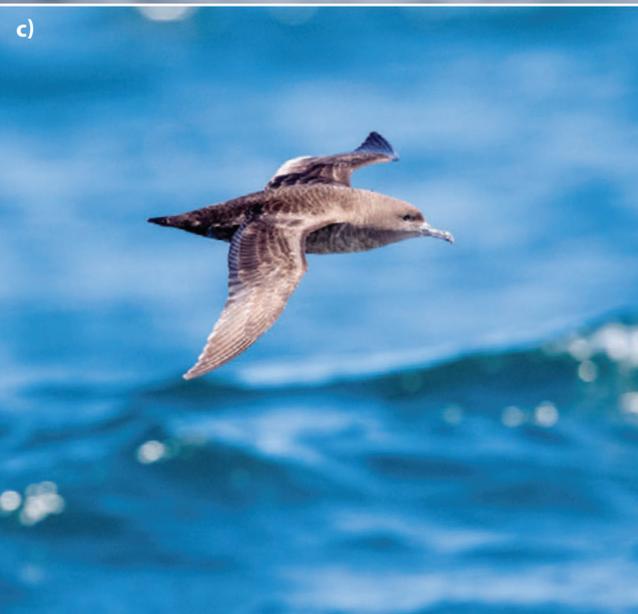
### **Pincoya Storm-petrels**

Our first target species was the Pincoya Storm-petrel *Oceanites (o) pincoyae*, first formally described to science in 2013 (Harrison *et al.*). Although this distinctive bird had been previously overlooked ornithologically, it came to light when photographed by Irish birders in 2009. Afterwards, this species/race was regularly seen in Reloncavi Sound, immediately to the south of Puerto Montt during the early twenty-teens. These are the waters most of the cruise ships traverse when they pass to the north of Chiloe Island on their way into and out of Puerto Montt.

More recently, Pincoya Storm-petrels have become harder to observe, so our first objective was to actually find some. Kirk Zufelt had set aside enough time to explore all the sheltered waters between Chiloe Island and the Chilean mainland. We also had published and unpublished trip reports to hand, as well as information solicited locally from Rafaele Di Biase, a local birding guide from nearby Puerto Varas.

We motored along on a windless day. The flat, blue waters of the Gulf of Ancud were dotted with longlining hake boats. While some of these attracted only flocks of gulls we also sighted species we were to see commonly over the coming days, such as Pink-footed Shearwater *Puffinus creatopus*, Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris* and Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*. In the distance were snow-covered Andean peaks, with the green hillsides of Chile's Lakes Region at the seashore.

In early afternoon, Colin and Kirk spotted a raft of storm-petrels on the sea ahead of us - a group of 60–70 Pincoyas, with whitish flanks divided by dark folded wings, held



**Plate 86 (opposite) a–b.** Black-browed Albatross. **c.** Sooty Shearwater. **d.** Pink-footed Shearwater. **e–f.** Pincoya Storm-petrel.

at a rakish angle. The birds were difficult to approach in the calm water, but we worked on photographing loafing rafts of them for four or five hours. We estimated that just over one thousand were seen in total. In late afternoon we proceeded to an anchorage beside Chiloe Island for the first of two nights. Over the following two days, we returned to the same central part of the Gulf of Ancud, but the weather was cloudier, windier and cooler. Still, the Pincoya Storm-petrels were well seen again and we were pleased with this early success.

We had decided not to go any further south, having found our first main target in good numbers, so a more northerly anchorage was found with a view to following the outgoing tide the following day, past the north of Chiloe Island and into the Pacific.

### Open ocean cruising

We reached the open ocean by mid-morning. The sea got rougher but it stayed sunny all day. There were encounters with Northern Giant Petrels *Macronectes halli*, White-chinned Petrels *Procellaria aequinoctialis*, Wandering and Northern Royal Albatrosses *Diomedea exulans* and *D. sanfordi*. These were all reminders of what a good place the Humboldt Current can be for sightings of New Zealand-breeding seabirds in both adult and juvenile plumages.



**Plate 87 a.** Northern Giant Petrel. **b–c.** White-chinned Petrel.



Plate 88 a–b. Northern Royal Albatross.

In late afternoon, more *Oceanites* Storm-petrels were sighted in the wake. These birds exhibited a lot of white in the secondary coverts, and strongly resembled the Pincoyas we had seen on the previous three days, but were 40–50 kms out at sea. Pincoya Storm-petrel is reported (Harrison *et al.*) to be restricted to the calm and sheltered waters to the north and east of Chiloe, but while we considered ‘Fuegian’ Storm-petrel (*O. chilensis*), these birds seemed indistinguishable from the Storm-petrels seen earlier in the Gulf of Ancud.

We had originally planned to move north up the Humboldt Current, but with high winds closer to the coast, we sailed on a more north-westerly heading, taking us farther out to sea. A 3–4 m. swell from the southwest made for ever-changing seascapes, a backdrop for the De Filippi’s Petrels *Pterodroma defilippiana* we started to encounter.

A couple of days later, numbers of Juan Fernandez Petrels *Pterodroma externa* started to increase the closer we got to the Juan Fernandez Islands, and we noted our first Stejneger’s Petrels *P. longirostris* too. We were to get plenty of practice identifying this trio of *pterodromas* in the following days.

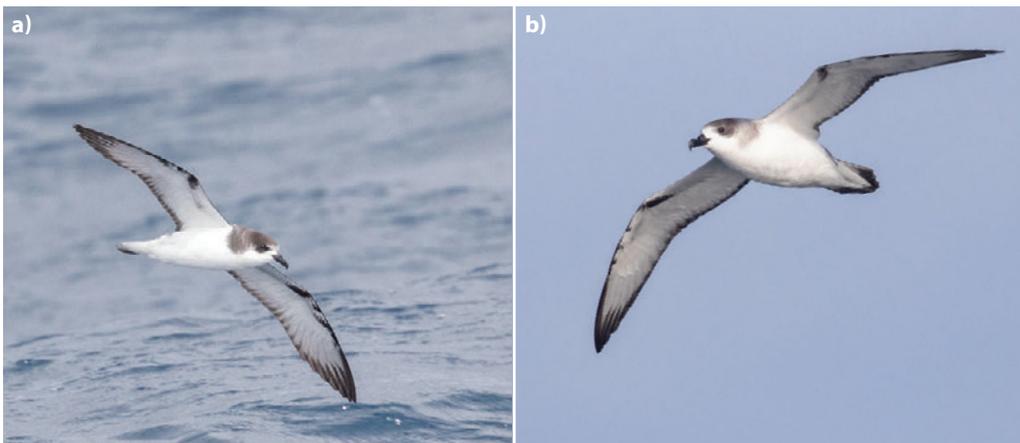


Plate 89 a. Stejneger’s Petrel. b. Juan Fernandez Petrel.

Michael Brooke surveyed breeding *pterodromas* on Selkirk in 1983, and this area was covered by Hadoram Shirihai in 2013 and 2015, and by Kirk Zufelt and others in late 2014. But in most respects the area is remote and under-birded.

On 29 February we had Selkirk Island in sight, and we woke to find a Juan Fernandez Petrel stowaway. Didier had found four in the rear cockpit overnight, the birds lending new meaning to the phrase ‘poop deck’. One had found its way into the main cabin. It was gently shown the exit.



Plate 90. Didier Wattlelot and Selkirk Island.

We spent the day cruising with the island in view. Juan Fernandez Petrels seemed to outnumber the smaller Stejnegers’ about fifty-to-one. This close to Selkirk, De Filippi’s Petrels were absent.

March 1st was another *pterodroma* photo practice day, with a Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* (one of three seen on the trip) found sitting in the water late on.

### Isla Alejandro Selkirk

In overcast but calm conditions we motored around Isla Alejandro Selkirk, pausing only for a small whale (possibly Bryde’s *Balaenoptera brydei*) and to trade for some lobsters with local fishermen.

In the late afternoon we headed east and in calm seas and soft light tried to improve our images of Juan Fernandez and Stejneger’s Petrels, which were flying past us back to their home island. Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* also made an appearance.



Plate 91. The settlement at Robinson Crusoe Island.



Plate 92. Juan Fernandez Firecrown.

## Isla Robinson Crusoe

The next day we anchored near San Juan Bautista, the only settlement on Robinson Crusoe Island, and had a few hours ashore. Isla Robinson Crusoe was known as Mas-a-tierra from the time of its discovery, and DeFilippi's Petrel is also known as Masatierra Petrel because they breed on the island, or rocky islets close to it. However, our main interest was an endemic hummingbird - the Juan Fernandez Firecrown *Sephanoides fernandensis*. A nature trail called the *Ruta Turistica Plazoleta El Yunque* is the designated place to go and look for them. Also, the hummers were feeding on exotic flowers in yards and gardens. We saw our first JF Firecrowns in a playground called *Los Angelitos* within view of the seafront, and found more on the road towards the Plazoleta.

Moored overnight, we left San Juan Bautista harbour in the morning with a complement of mosquitoes that hid in nooks and crannies on the *Sauvage* and took several days to clear.

We had a procession of inquisitive DeFilippi's Petrels making a re-appearance as we sailed eastwards. More than the two Selkirk-breeding *pterodromas* (Juan Fernandez, Stejnegers) they were ready to come close to the rear of the boat, presenting a challenge to get them in the camera frame.

Most of the time during the voyage we had trailed a drip of fish oil, which tended to attract storm-petrels at the very least. Kirk and Didier spent ages during the voyage warming the oil, which was too viscous in the cool conditions most days.

At this stage, with Robinson Crusoe Island still in view, the fish oil slick proved useful again, attracting up to 30 White-bellied Storm-petrels (the local race *segethi*). Hadoram Shirihai had photographed an all-dark morph (presumably of this species) but we didn't see any.

A passing Masked Booby *Sula dactylactra* was a trip first. More 'warm water' (relative to the Humboldt Current, that is) species noted were Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcatus* (which breed in the Galapagos Islands 4,000 km to the north) and Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaeton aethereus*.



Plate 93 a. White-bellied Storm-petrel. b. Masked Booby. c. Swallow-tailed Gull.

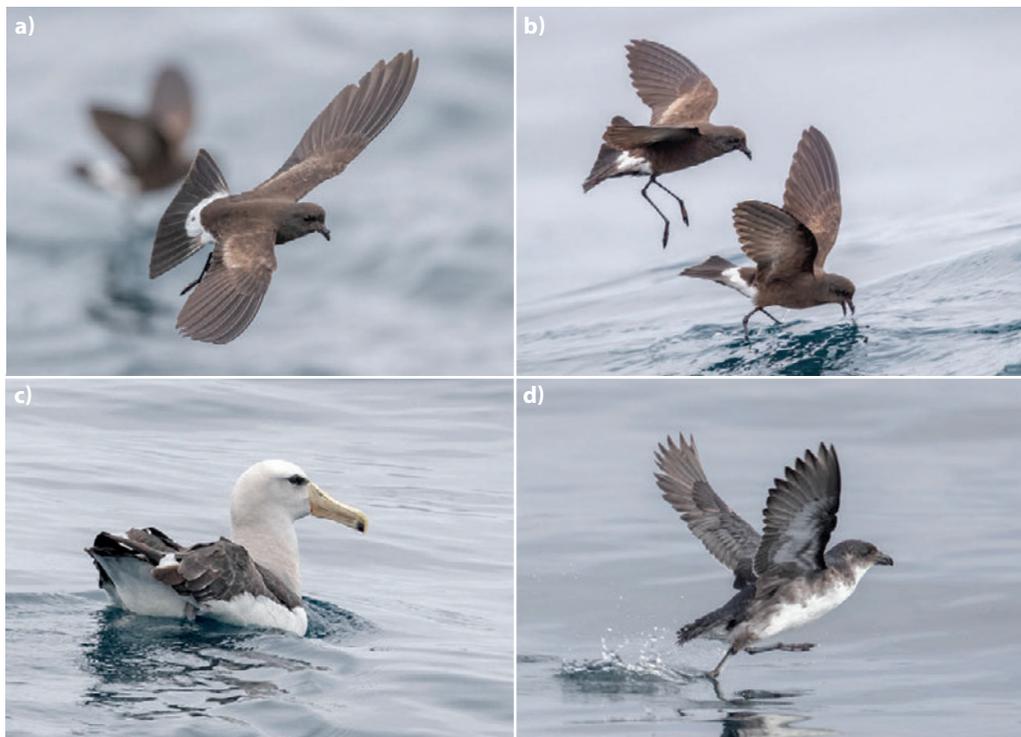


Plate 94 a–b. Wilson's Complex-type Storm-petrel. c. Salvin's Albatross. d. Peruvian Diving-petrel.

In the late afternoon a series of whale blows was seen, but we didn't manage to see any actual cetaceans.

In the days after we left the Juan Fernandez Islands we found Wilson's/Fuegian Storm-petrels following the oil slick, as well as a few more White-bellied Storm-petrels.

### Humboldt Current

Closer to the mainland we were back in the cooler Humboldt current, with a steady procession of mostly northbound Sooty Shearwaters. Albatrosses included Black-browed, Wandering and Salvin's *Diomedea cauta salvini*, but few came close to the boat. Also seen were several 'Pacific' Albatrosses, a proposed split from Buller's.

With time to spare, we zigzagged in and out of the Current waters. Around this time (at around 30°S) we were surprised to disturb a Waved Albatross *D. irrorata*, our only one of the trip.

The voyage drawing to a close, we spent the afternoon of 9 March in the Humboldt Current photographing an obliging horde of 'Wilson's Complex-type Storm-petrels, possibly *Oceanites oceanicus chilensis*. The birds mostly had very little white in the wings and body and didn't resemble any of the *Oceanites* Storm-petrels we had seen well before.

Cruising within a couple of kilometres of the coast we encountered up to 100 Peruvian Diving-petrels *Pelecanoides garnotii* in an afternoon, sometimes in groups of 12–15 birds including some unable or unwilling to fly, a sign that this endangered species must have been breeding not very far away.



**Plate 95.** Party pooper. A Juan Fernandez Petrel stowaway.

Our penultimate night was spent in Bahia Tongoy. In the morning we watched the birds around the nets of the local sardine-fishing fleet, mainly pelicans, gulls and cormorants. A succession of Diving-petrels was again seen, mostly heading south.

### Last port of call

Our final destination was Las Herraduras Yacht Club in Coquimbo, about 500km north of Santiago, where the bay had many coastal birds including adult and juvenile Inca Terns *Larosterna inca*. We had another admin day on 12 March, caught up with Coronavirus news on the internet and got our tickets for the 11 o'clock Pullman bus back to Santiago the following day. We enjoyed a final dinner on *Sauvage*, and bags packed said our au revoirs to Didier and Sophie in the morning.

While we had been away sailing the carefree southern seas it seemed that the world had changed. We were lucky to finish when we did, for with borders closing we only just managed to get away, including the Wattrelots on board the *Sauvage*.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Didier and Sophie for looking after us, and to Kirk, Colin and Mike for their entertaining and stimulating company on the voyage.

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# South Georgia update

by Alison Neil, Chief Executive, the South Georgia Heritage Trust

Dear David, you asked for an update since I last reported in *Sea Swallow* 66, and I am glad to say it is all good news. You may recall that the extensive island-wide survey of the formerly infested areas that SGHT undertook in 2017–18 came out clean - there were no further signs of rodents. Since then the news has remained good; there have been no positive sightings of rats or mice since the baiting work was completed, the song of the endangered South Georgia Pipit *Anthus antarcticus* (an indicator of breeding environment) can now be heard all over the main island, and other birds such as petrels are beginning to return in numbers. We are hoping to carry out a bird count, possibly in 2025 (which will be 250 years since Cook discovered South Georgia), to give us more information on the progress of bird recovery. In the meantime, we are supporting the South Georgia Government's biosecurity programme, which includes a permanent rodent detection dog and handler team to check vessels visiting South Georgia.



Plates 96–97. (top) Rodent dog protection team, Sammy the dog and Naomi his handler. © SGHT (bottom) Antarctic Terns, one of the birds that has benefited from the eradication project. © SGHT

Thanks for your and your readers' continued interest in South Georgia.

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# Seabird reports 2019

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by Captain Stephen Chapman, MN, Seabird Recorder

There has been a big push in the last year to get a backlog of data onto Excel and bulk uploaded to our online database. This will enable anyone to interrogate the data and see what and who has been where. We have reached a stage where data can be entered on the database as it comes in, without delays. For RNBWS this has been one of the few benefits of lockdown.

The second big push has been to validate existing records. It was relatively easy a few years ago to remove sightings of petrels and shearwaters from the middle of Africa. They appeared there simply due to coding errors in longitude. Longitude  $-20^\circ$  is in the eastern Atlantic, but if inadvertently coded as  $+20^\circ$  that is in Libya. The need for these changes is only apparent by looking at on-screen plots and maps. The arrangements for using the Google mapping feature, for which we now pay per use, means that the fineness of detail is greatly improved with warning messages removed from map displays. For an example of how well the mapping feature can work check out the database by inserting *Alabaster* for *Observer* and focus on the records for the Caribbean island of St Lucia. This illustrates very well the fine detail and the sightings of frigatebirds, pelicans, boobies and gulls recorded.

It has been noted before that sharing data is the way forward, and we continue discussions with the BTO with the aim of sharing our data which goes back more than 70 years. There is work going on behind the scenes in Excel to get it into a format that is compatible with their system. We have agreed on what needs to be done and that will be the focus of our efforts in the coming year. In addition to sharing data for their use I see potential for analysing and plotting our data seasonally and examining the volume of counts; at present plots show the presence equally for a sighting of one bird as for a concentration of 1,000 birds, and are constrained to single species.

It is a pleasure to report that data is now being entered on the database as received. I

encourage observers to check their own records and see that they are accurately entered. It may be interrogated by observer's name, by species or by ship name.

We continue to list the observers, their voyages and their activity, plus any highlights of the year, but without the pages listing details of species, positions, observers and dates. As always, if you want to study a species or an area, please ask. The records can be extracted and the data set sent to you without any trouble.

## Reports received in 2019

In the year 2019 reports of seabirds at sea were received from the following observers:

**David Ballance** - MV *Queen Mary 2* April - Passage Southampton to New York and return. MV *Magellan* September. Portbury, Honfleur, Invergordon, Lerwick, Kirkwall, Belfast, Ringaskiddy, Portbury, Reykyavik, Isafjordur, Akureyi, Seydisfordur, Cobh, Portbury. Paper reports and detailed notes.

**Keith Betton** - MV *Enderby (Professor Khromov)* November. Bluff, Snares, Enderby, Macquarie Is, Campbell Is, Antipodes Is, Bounty Is, Chatham Islands, Dunedin. Observations supplied on Excel. Full report in *Sea Swallow* 68: 49-61.

**Stephen Chapman** - Offshore Kaikoura, New Zealand January, pelagic cruise. MV *Caledonian Sky* January-February. Milford Sound, Stewart Is, Dunedin, Akaroa, Kaikoura, Motuara Is, Kāpiti Is, Milford Sound. Observations supplied on Excel. Full report in *Sea Swallow* 68: 39-48. MV *Normandie* May-June. Portsmouth, Caen, Portsmouth. Excel files.

**Simon Cook** - MV *Serenissima*, January-February 2019. Cartagena, Colombia, San Blas Islands, Panama - Panama Canal, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama Canal, San Blas Islands, Cartagena. MV *Island Sky* June. Cairns, Queensland - Broome, West

Australia and Kimberley cruises: Broome - Darwin and return. Excel reports and supporting notes and photographs.

**Steve Copesey, Mark Cutts and Tony Tindall** - November. Offshore Southport, Australia, pelagic cruise on *Grinner 2*. Excel file and report by Steve Copesey on page 52.

**Richard Farrington** - Yacht *Escapade of Rame* April–May. Notes from an Atlantic voyage from the Caribbean to Western Approaches. Excel report.

**Tony Norris** - MV *Enderby (Professor Khromov)* January–February. Voyage to Southern Ocean and Antarctica: Bluff, Snares, Auckland Islands, Macquarie Is, Ross Sea, Balleny Islands, Campbell Is and return to Bluff.

Please continue sending your records to: data@rnbws.org.uk . Thank you.

## Selected seabird highlights from the ornithological press

### Status of Cory's Shearwater in the western Mediterranean.

*Dutch Birding* 41,3: 159–165.

This paper presents with a map the distribution of nesting of Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* and Scopoli's Shearwater *C. diomedea* in the Mediterranean. Both species spend the non-breeding period primarily in the Atlantic. It also discusses and illustrates at-sea and in-hand identification criteria of the two species, which even in ideal conditions are challenging given the overlap in size and robustness of the two species and noting that males are larger and stockier than females.

### Variation and identification of Barolo Shearwater and Boyd's Shearwater.

*Dutch Birding* 41,4: 215–237.

Separation of Barolo Shearwater *Puffinus baroli* from Boyd's Shearwater *P. boydi* is complex. This extensively illustrated paper shows the extent and gives pointers for distinguishing the two. In most cases this involves establishing agreement between a combination of traits. Particularly important are undertail-covert pattern, under primary pattern, face pattern and flight behaviour.

The research concludes that a notable amount of dark in the undertail-coverts

eliminates *baroli* and all or nearly all white undertail-coverts virtually eliminates *boydi*. However, caution is required, as c. 50% of *boydi* have white extending into the undertail-coverts, and some have white running down the side to the under tail-coverts, suggesting that the coverts, if hidden by the feet, are also white. That said, the undertail-covert pattern is a difficult feature to get to grips with in the field. In travelling flight, it is best seen in photographs taken when a bird banks, offering a ventral view, or during take-off.

Face markings were found to overlap considerably and are variable, especially on *baroli*. On average, *boydi* is darker faced than *baroli*. In general, a white-faced bird is most likely to be *baroli*, while a dark-faced bird is most likely to be *boydi*.

Maps of non-breeding distribution show *boydi* extending uniquely into the tropics to the equator. *Baroli* ranges out to 40°W and into the Bay of Biscay and northwards to the Western Approaches.

### Identification of Short-tailed Shearwater in the North Atlantic Ocean.

*British Birds* 112: 250–263.

If the challenges of separating *Calonectris* or *Puffinus* shearwaters above are not enough, then you might add *Ardenna* too. The researchers suggest that the vagrancy potential of Short-tailed Shearwaters *Ardenna tenuirostris* is greater than suggested by the few documented records, and that it may have been overlooked or confused with the similar-looking Sooty Shearwater *A. grisea*. Records for the Atlantic are presented, including one of thousands at 55°S 0°E to 50°S 8°E in the vicinity of Bouvetoya Is. Single birds have been recorded off Brazil, Florida and Massachusetts. Criteria for separating Balearic *P. mauretanicus*, Short-tailed and Sooty are illustrated, with plates by wildlife artist John Gale, and photographs of birds at sea are discussed.

### Black-bellied Storm-petrels at Banco de la Concepción, Canary Islands, in 2011–18, and WP status.

*Dutch Birding* 41,6: 407–415.

Six observations of Black-bellied Storm-petrels *Fregatta tropica* in the vicinity of 30°N 13°W, in the relatively shallow waters

off the Canary Islands, are presented, all in the period 2011–18. Over the years we have had data from many ships transiting these waters. None have reported this storm-petrel; in fact there is but one sighting north of the equator in the North Atlantic. The authors discuss the status of the species in the Western Palearctic and the rationale for their origins.

**A Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* at Fernando de Noronha archipelago, equatorial Atlantic Ocean.**

*Bull BOC* 139(4): 333–337.

This paper reports a documented record of a Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* at Fernando de Noronha, 360 km of the coast of northeast Brazil in the equatorial Atlantic. It is presumed that the bird seen there originated from Trindade Island, c1,800 km to the south, since it is the species' nearest breeding site, and it is hypothesised that it moved with the south-east trade winds towards the north-east Brazilian coast. The paper reviews useful ways of distinguishing frigatebird species.

**Records of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* in the Pitcairn Islands with additional observations during 2015–19.**

*Bull BOC* 140(1): 99–102.

The Pitcairn Islands are a UK Overseas Territory comprising four islands (Oeno, Pitcairn, Henderson and Ducie) spanning more than 600 km in eastern Polynesia, in the South Pacific Ocean. Oeno and Ducie are low coral atolls, Henderson is a large raised coral island, and Pitcairn is volcanic in origin. The paper summarises records of Brown Booby across the island group and adds three additional sightings on North Beach, Henderson from 2015–19.

**Overland movement and migration phenology in relation to breeding of Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea*.**

*Ibis*, 162: 373–380.

It is often implicitly assumed that seabirds migrate using marine environments, but this assumption is increasingly being challenged by electronic tracking data. The arrival and departure routes of Arctic Terns breeding on the North Sea coast of the United Kingdom are unknown but there has been speculation about the possibility of overland migration. Analysis of light-level geolocator data from birds breeding on the Farne Islands suggests

that these birds arrived and left their North Sea colony overland via the Irish Sea, rather than taking coastal routes. In addition, some departing birds may enter the North Atlantic by crossing Ireland rather than through the Irish Sea. The authors suggest that this study supports the idea that overland migration may be a more widespread and consistent strategy for seabirds than has been realized.

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**Stephen Chapman**

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# Landbirds at sea 2019

by Captain Stephen Chapman, MN, Landbirds at Sea Recorder

This year's summary report is based on data received for the year 2019. With so many voyage reports from the high latitudes of the Southern Ocean it is no surprise that incidences of land birds on board ship are few. That said, getting ashore on the subAntarctic islands has thrown up some exciting views of endemics. Off the Snares Keith Betton, without landing, ticked endemics: a pair of Tomtits the distinctive race *Petroica macrocephala dannefaerd* (see page 50 of SS68), quickly followed by a New Zealand Fernbird *Megalurus punctatus caudatus*. While ashore on the Auckland Islands he added the furtive Auckland Island race of Subantarctic Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica* on Enderby Island. Red-

crowned Parakeets *Cyanoramphus novaezealandiae* were less easy to pin down but the race of the *chathamensis* was seen on Chatham Island (page 53).

Once again this report majors on Simon Cook's voyages while working as a lecturer/naturalist on board expedition cruise ships. It is also a great pleasure to read the systematically organised daily log reports, illustrated with sketches, received from David Ballance, though crossing the Atlantic at speeds of up to 24 knots viewing from Deck 9 he saw few birds at sea and no land birds at all on deck. Otherwise reports of land birds at sea were received from the following observers:



Plate 98. Two of the Rainbow Bee-eaters; lifeboat behind. © S Cook

**David Ballance (DB).**

MV *Magellan* September 2019. Portbury, Honfleur, Invergordon, Lerwick, Kirkwall, Belfast, Ringaskiddy, returning to Portbury for a voyage to Iceland: Reykyavik, Isafjordur, Akureyi, Seydisfordur, Cobh, Portbury. Paper reports and detailed notes.

**Simon Cook (SC).**

MV *Serenissima*, January–February 2019. Cartagena, Colombia, San Blas Islands, Panama - Panama Canal, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama Canal, San Blas Islands, Cartagena. MV *Island Sky* June 2019. Cairns, Queensland - Broome, West Australia and Kimberley cruises: Broome - Darwin and return. Excel reports and supporting notes and photographs.

Please continue sending your records to: [data@rnbws.org.uk](mailto:data@rnbws.org.uk). Thank you. The following are a few highlights.

## European waters

DB reported a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* and a Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* on board at 53.7N 1.1E (off Norfolk) on 4 Sept. Off Mizzen Head, south of Ireland, 51.2N 8.8W, on 13 Sept three Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* were noted.

## Northern Australia

Cruising 8–18 nm off Cape York Peninsula, northern Queensland on 2 June, SC reported a Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*, at 14.1S, 144.4E, 8.3 nm offshore. It came in from another ship ahead and steaming in the same direction. Photographed on board and flying around until 10.38. SC noted that according to his field guide it only occurs in a small part of Australia – Victoria/NSW. Next Rainbow Bee-eaters, *Merops ornatus*, appeared. One was heard, then seen in flight and it landed on board at 09.56 at 13.9S, 144.3E, about 18 nm offshore. Whilst on board they caught and ate moths. Simon comments that they are migrants between New Guinea and Australia but he could scarcely believe his ears and eyes to see these absolutely fabulous birds.

On 5 June, 24 nm north of the eastern end of Melville Island, 10.9S 131.6E, a Little Friarbird, *Philemon citreogularis*, was sighted and flew off to the south towards land.

**Stephen Chapman**

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# Obituary

## First Officer (Comms) WF Curtis, 1942–2019

Bill Curtis was a dedicated naturalist from an early age, and joined the Merchant Navy as a radio officer for Mobil Tankers, and subsequently the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), where his special interest in seabirds quickly came to the attention of Bill Bourne, who recruited him to become a member of RNBWS. His name first appears in *Sea Swallow* 19: 41 when he correctly identified a Ross's Gull in Portland Harbour on 13 August 1967. Bill Bourne commented on this highly unusual record: "We have known Mr Curtis for a number of years as a careful, painstaking and experienced observer who produces notes which appear reliable and can be checked".

Bill Curtis subsequently became a prolific observer, and contributed a further 13 articles to *Sea Swallow*. His RFA service took him to many unusual sea areas, as can be seen on the map.

Jointly with Bill Bourne, he authored two major analyses of RNBWS observations over the period 1982–84: Part 1 (SS 34) - *South Atlantic Seabirds* and Part 2 (SS 35) - *South Atlantic Bird Islands*. Three items appear in SS 37 (1988): *Highlights of a South Atlantic tour 1986–87*; *First occurrence of Buller's Albatross in the Atlantic Ocean*; and *An example of melanism in Wilson's Storm Petrel*.



**Figure 1.** RNBWS database inputs from Bill Curtis.

In April 1985 he recorded a Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* off Cornwall, noted a Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata* near the Falklands in December 1994 and recorded a McCormick's Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* off West Scotland on 14 May 1994. His last contribution was an Audouin's Gull *Ichthyaetos audouinii* off the Isle of Wight, thought to have been the first record for the UK.

After leaving the sea, aged 55, he returned to his home near Spurn Head, and became an active member of the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union, compiling the *Yorkshire Bird Report* for 11 years. I shall personally miss his neat hand-written letters over many years, and all RNBWS members owe him a huge debt for his major contribution to the international reputation of the Society. He was a true giant.

**Michael Casement**

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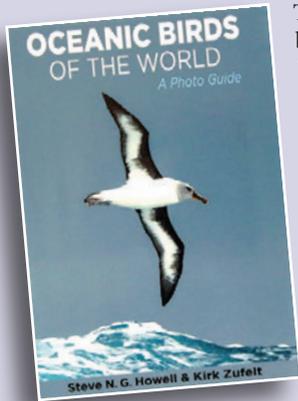


**Plate 99.** Bill Curtis. © W Curtis

# Book Review

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**Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photo Guide:** by Steve N.G. Howell & Kirk Zufelt. Princeton University Press, 2019. Paperback, 359pp, 2,200 colour photographs, 114 range maps. £19.99.



The authors define 'oceanic' birds as seabirds rather than 'seaside' birds; those that make their living out at sea, not at the littoral. The coverage includes all Penguins, Alcids, Diving-petrels, Petrels, Albatrosses, Storm-petrels, Tropicbirds, Frigatebirds, Gannets and Boobies, Skuas and Jaegers, four oceanic Gulls, the tropical Terns and Noddies and the two species of oceanic Phalaropes.

The introduction includes an overview of current taxonomy and the authors' rationale in their courageous decision to recognise many subspecies as full species and provisionally recognise several formally undescribed cryptic forms as species. There is sound advice about seabird identification, with the important proviso that many birds seen will not be exactly identified. Flight manner, wing morphology and plumage variation are discussed; wing moult strategies, timing and their use in separating some cryptic species are considered.

Each species is illustrated by a montage of flight images showing dorsal and ventral views at different angles with brief highlighted hints on ID. There is also a concise text giving details of breeding, range, timing of wing moult and flight characteristics. Most of the 2200+ photographs were taken by the authors, requiring years of dedication plus a lot of sea time. The quality of photographs is high and has been retained even with the size limitations of the book.

There are 114 range maps mostly for species complexes and some individual species with major breeding islands indicated. Coverage is not complete, for example the Atlantic species of frigatebird have a range map but

the Indian Ocean and Pacific frigatebirds do not and presumably this and other gaps were decided by the available space.

There are two appendices; A: a useful series of world maps showing all islands and regions mentioned in the species accounts and shown on the distribution charts. B: Taxonomy and English Names. With their promotion of some sub-species to full species and recognition of cryptic species the authors have had to coin 'English' common names. The new names are mostly geographic or honour persons who have discovered or studied these species. In the case of the Whenua Hou Diving-petrel *Pelecanoides whenuahouensis* (Fischer *et al.* 2018, PLoS ONE 13(6): e0197766), a previously undescribed critically endangered species nesting only on Whenua Hou/Codfish Island off southern New Zealand, the chosen name is changed to Codfish Diving-petrel on the basis that this is a Maori name not English. There are a number of seabirds named after indigenous island names and we have Yelkouan Shearwater from the Turkish 'Yelkovan' or 'wind chaser'. The name Whenua Hou was chosen by the Maori owners of the island and is appropriate for a New Zealand species.

The book is well priced and is an excellent ID reference for seabird enthusiasts that summarises and extends the boundaries of seabird taxonomy. Highly recommended.

**Neil Cheshire**

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**Plate 100.** Frank Zino climbing up from one of the Zino's Petrel breeding ledges in the mountains of Madeira.  
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