

Western Pacific Odyssey #1976

15 March - 14 April 2019

Day 1: Friday 15 March Tauranga

The Port of Tauranga greeted us with a fine warm day as we met for the first time and boarded the *Spirit of Enderby*. After orientating ourselves to the layout of the ship and clearing customs in the bar library we had our first introduction to the staff and ship.

At 17:00 we welcomed the pilot aboard for our departure. The sun was out as we steamed close to Mount Manganui with several species of bird seen before we had made the open sea.

The coastal birdlife was quickly replaced by a few pelagic species as we set our course to pass to the west of Mayor Island. By sun down we had retreated to the lecture room to go over safety procedures closely followed by a lifeboat drill.

After sundown the chefs treated us to a fine dinner of lamb and salmon before attending the first bird list of the voyage and retiring for an early night in quiet seas.



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Day 2: Saturday 16 March Hauraki Gulf

A calm morning and a spectacular dawn saw the *Spirit of Enderby* approaching the Mokohinau Islands which form the Northern edge of the Hauraki Gulf. As we circled the Maori Rocks we were able to get excellent, close, views of Grey Ternlets feeding over boil-ups of fish.

The *Spirit of Enderby* did two loops of the rocks before heading out to the 200 metre bottom contour where our chances of seeing the New Zealand Storm-petrel (NZSP) were higher. Chris volunteered for the smelly job of laying a fish oil slick from the aft deck and come out smelling of roses as almost immediate sightings of the storm-petrel were had.

We did several passes of the slick and were rewarded with further sightings of at least 12 NZSP, along with a White-faced Storm-petrel and a couple of Wilson's Storm-petrels. Several Cook's Petrels, Flesh-footed Shearwaters and Black Petrels were seen and hundreds of Buller's Shearwaters.

As we steamed north towards Cape Reinga we were able to add both the cryptic Pycroft's Petrel and Black-winged Petrel to our list, as well as a couple of spouting whales (thought to be Bryde's Whales) and a mixed pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales and Bottlenose Dolphins which were very actively feeding.

Another excellent dinner complete with birthday cake was had before Chris gave a talk on the expected seabirds between New Zealand and New Caledonia.

Day 3: Sunday 17 March

At Sea

At dawn the *Spirit of Enderby* was at the King Bank, off the Three Kings Islands. Early risers were able to catch good sightings of Kermadec Petrel, New Zealand Storm-petrel, Little Shearwater, Long-tailed Skua (Jaeger) and White-necked Petrel.

Impressive numbers of Buller's Shearwater were present – maybe a few thousands, and several albatrosses were either sitting on the water or milling about in the very light winds. At least 3 different NZ (Wandering) Albatross of the *gibsoni* sub-species were seen. Also about 10 NZ White-capped (Shy) Albatross and a real bonus in the form of a Northern Royal Albatross.

The day continued with a steady stream of good birds, including many considered to be rare in New Zealand waters – 20 or more Wedge-tailed Shearwater, about 20 White-necked Petrel, a couple of Kermadec Petrels, more Long-tailed Skuas, and a couple of Gould's Petrels. A single White Tern was a long way south.

Marine mammal highlights were 2 Cuvier's Beaked Whales which showed well if briefly, and a pod of Striped Dolphin.

In the mid-afternoon there was a flurry of activity of the sort that makes birding in remote marine locations such a thrill. A dark *Pterodroma* petrel flew past with a Black-winged Petrel. Initial thoughts appear to be confirmed from photos taken – this was a "Magnificent" Petrel, followed shortly by a standard-looking Collared Petrel. Even if "Magnificent" isn't considered to be a full species, these are both remarkable since only one Collared Petrel has ever been recorded in NZ!

If that wasn't enough, Chris soon called a small all-dark petrel across the bow. This bird may be the first ever Fiji Petrel seen away from Fiji (where it is barely known anyway). Those on board with first-hand experience of the species are certain of its identity.

And the excitement didn't end there! After dinner Sav gave an excellent talk on the rediscovery of the New Zealand Storm-petrel: an intriguing tale of chance, bureaucracy, derring-do and mystery played out within sight of New Zealand's largest city.



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Day 4: Monday 18 March
At Sea to Norfolk Island

A distinct pattern to ship board life seems to be developing, with the keenest birders up at daybreak to start scouring the sea and sky for birds. Around 08:00 the smell of a delicious breakfast cooking drifts up over the top deck and slowly, one by one the birders give in to the temptation and head down to eat,

hoping that whilst they are gone they won't miss anything too exciting!

This was a relatively slow day on the bird front, though some additions to the list indicated that we were getting ever closer to Norfolk Island, and to the warmer tropical waters: a handful of Masked Boobies, 6 White Terns, 3 Tahiti Petrels and a White-tailed Tropicbird (which is a rarity in Australian territorial waters). A couple of Sperm Whales late on were well received. With 150 nautical miles to go until reaching Norfolk Island we were over some very deep water, a long way from any land, which explains the reduced number of birds and presence of whales.

Day 5: Tuesday 19 March Norfolk Island

Overnight the *Spirit of Enderby* came to anchor at Sydney Bay on the south coast of Norfolk Island.

With an early breakfast under our belts the Australian Customs and Immigration agents came on-board. The intensity of activity on board ship increased throughout breakfast as everyone got ready to go ashore. The first Zodiacs left the *Spirit of Enderby* at 07:00 for the harbour. Despite a good roll coming into the beach the landings were accomplished by all with no mishaps. We were welcomed ashore by Margaret Christian and her family who were lined up to show us around Norfolk.

After getting everyone ashore, we piled into the buses and mini vans for the drive up to the National Park, or a round-the-island sight-seeing tour. The birders made for Palm Glen, in the foothills of the National Park and perfect for endemic land bird hunting. The key target species of Norfolk Island Parakeet, Slender-billed White-eye, Norfolk Robin, Norfolk Whistler and Norfolk Gerygone were seen almost immediately with other species such as the Pacific Emerald Dove and Grey Fantail seen not long after. A couple of Wandering Tattlers were by the wharf.

The generalist party enjoyed a tour through the Kingston penal colony buildings, a peruse of the main street of Burnt Pine and a lap of the island. By 13:00 both parties were back at the Kingstown wharf and ready for a quick Zodiac trip back to the *Spirit of Enderby*. Once back aboard we tucked into a superb late lunch prepared by Ed and Damian and enjoyed the views of the island as we steamed our way up the west coast. The late afternoon rewarded us with some good birding from the ship with sightings of Tahiti and another Magnificent Petrel, and the local race of Little Shearwater being the most notable. A pod of bow-riding Bottlenose Dolphins were enjoyed by many.



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Day 6: Wednesday 20 March
At Sea to New Caledonia

Only a few birds but some really good species before breakfast this morning – yet another Magnificent Petrel (the darkest and most compelling one yet), our first 3 Providence Petrels, a couple of Tahitis and a White-tailed Tropicbird highlighted the list.

The rest of the day was slow but steady, and the quality of species was top-notch. For many, the stream of Providence Petrels through the day was a real highlight, with at least 30 individuals passing – some very close. Plenty of Gould's, and Tahiti Petrels were the supporting cast.

An apparent Band-rumped Storm-petrel, way away from where they are supposed to be, created some discussion points.

The day concluded with Chris giving a comprehensive briefing on the expected birds of New Caledonia.

Day 7: Thursday 21 March New Caledonia

Overnight we made good time to New Caledonia. A very early morning pick-up of the pilot, and eventual clearance by Customs and bio-security got us away towards Riviere de Bleue National Park only slightly behind schedule. And that was about when the rain started...

On arrival at the park we had a quick comfort stop, under strict instructions from Chris that this wasn't a birding stop! Here we meet Jean-Mark, and Isabel, our guides and continued to Le Pont Perignon where we left the bus, crossed the bridge and were shuttled the six kilometres to the edge of the rainforest by minivan to start birding. The first species on everybody's wish list was the Kagu and the first 4 birds were soon found! These Kagu were to be the first of many allowing great views and excellent photo opportunities.

After finding the Kagu we walked through the forest along the road to Grande Kauri searching for other endemic birds. The road makes its way through second growth forest and at places there are clear views out over the river. The weather was mostly awful, with more-or-less continual rain through the day. Given the conditions we did amazingly well, since we saw an excellent range of endemic birds, with highlights including Southern Shrikebill, New Caledonian Friarbird, Horned Parakeet, New Caledonian Cuckooshrike and New Caledonian Myzomela. After Kagu, the rare Crow Honeyeater was top of many wish lists and most people eventually got good views of this massive beast.

A comfort stop back at the park entrance in continued rain added White-breasted Goshawk and New Caledonian Parakeet to an already extensive list.

The drive back to the ship was much quieter than our outbound journey, with the early morning start taking its toll and many people dozing off. We were safely back aboard the *Spirit of Enderby* in good time for dinner and spent the night at the wharf in Noumea.

By anyone's standards this was a big day for the birders!



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Day 8: Friday 22 March Mt Koghi, New Caledonia

Another early start saw the birders set off towards Mt Koghi at 05:00. Arriving while it was still dark we split into 2 groups for forest and road-side birding. Over the next few hours we all did bits of each location and a tremendous array of endemics were found: several Goliath Imperial Pigeon, at least 3 White-breasted Goshawk, a group of 5 South Melanesian Cuckooshrike and a couple of New Caledonian Crows, as well as many of the more widespread species from yesterday. The main prize though was New Caledonian Thicketbird which played hide and seek with a group for 40 minutes or so. This tremendously elusive species showed briefly to only a few lucky birders, but many others had glimpses and we all heard its distinctive call.

Non-endemic treats on show were Rufous Whistler, Long-tailed Triller and Metallic Pigeon.

Back to the *Spirit of Enderby* by 10:30 for departure, via a massive traffic jam caused by a crowd demonstrating against a proposed increase in pension ages. The demonstration itself was held right by our wharf!!

Afternoon birding once out of the Noumea Lagoon was characterized by large numbers of Gould's and Tahiti Petrel – at least 40 of each. A couple more Magnificent Petrels graced the ship with their presence, but most excitement was caused by 3 fly-by “New Caledonian” Storm-petrels. The third bird was really close in and an immediate dumping of fish oil really should have held its attention, but by the time we had turned back to view the ensuing slick there were absolutely no birds (of any species!?) present.

Tired but happy birders had an early night in preparation for another day at sea in some “high potential” waters.

Day 9: Saturday 23 March At Sea

Today was a fairly slow day of light breezes and mostly calm water. Plenty of flying fish being chased at times by Red-footed Boobies, which are becoming more numerous, along with several Brown and Masked Booby.

Early on there were a half-dozen or so Tahiti Petrel, but it was single birds of 4 species that made the headlines today – a “standard” form Collared Petrel showed very well, good views of what will presumably be our last Providence Petrel were had, a second Band-rumped Storm-petrel for the trip also showed well and a few had decent views (confirmed by photos) of a Vanuatu Petrel.

A bird that flashed past to port remains controversial, but may have been a Beck’s Petrel.

Day 10: Sunday 24 March

At Sea to Santa Ana

The *Spirit of Enderby* continued on a direct track towards Santa Ana, exactly to the north.

Flat calm conditions over very deep (14,000 ft) water and barely a bird to be seen but this turned into one of the most memorable of days...

There were eleven Red-footed Boobies roosting on the ship overnight so they provided some entertainment at first light. There were still some Wedge-tailed Shearwaters present, and a lone Wilson’s Storm-petrel was seen.

Then another Band-rumped Storm-petrel, our third. Surely an undescribed taxon so far from any known populations?

But then a bird appeared that was initially called as a skua, a shearwater and a petrel within a few seconds – large, heavy set, with a massive bill, all dark except for big white flashes in the primaries, an extraordinary flight progression – what on Earth is it?? Lisle had previously seen a similar bird some 300nm east of our position, but a brief sighting by some experienced observers had led to no real conclusion – now we had many observers and some pretty good photos – the potential new taxon of Band-rump was well and truly trumped!!

And then another appeared, and then a third individual showed a couple of hours later. Everyone seems happy that this is a distinctive but undescribed species, presumed to be a *Pseudobulwaria* since its head and bill resemble Tahiti Petrel.

Time to calm down and reflect on the enormity of these sightings...until another close Band-rumped came past which appears to be a different form to the other three...and then a close fly-by Vanuatu Petrel which gave better views to more people...and then a pod of beaked whales which were originally called as Blainville’s but showed themselves to be a newly described species xxxxxxxx!! Phew!! One or two celebratory drinks were had as we all came to terms with a wonderful day on the ocean. That’s what it’s all about!

Chris got his act together to give a briefing on the birds of the next two landings on Santa Ana and Makira after dinner.

Day 11: Monday 25 March

At Sea to Santa Ana

Through the morning the *Spirit of Enderby* made its way towards Santa Ana, with remarkably few birds seen. The few did include a couple of rather good species though – Streaked Shearwater and Tropical Shearwater were new for many birders aboard.

After the formalities of Customs and Immigration clearance we set about exploring Santa Ana after lunch.

In the short time available the birders split into 2 groups to go in different directions, but both groups covered all the ground eventually. Two very pretty fruit-dove species were seen: White-headed and Silver-

capped, with Silver-capped being a good “claw-back” from the list of Rennel endemics and near endemics that we had been denied by a wrecked ship spilling oil into the waters around Rennel Island.

Other top birds included Solomon Islands Sea Eagle, Sooty Myzomela, Mottled Flowerpecker, White-collared Monarch and the all-black “Ugi” form of Chestnut-bellied Monarch. A very successful introduction to the Solomons.

Day 12: Tuesday 26 March

Makira and Anuta Island – Solomon Islands, and At Sea

This was a day of three distinct parts – birding Makira in the morning, a welcome to the village of Anuta prior to lunch and then at sea in the afternoon.

An early start and a slow walk uphill for some of Makira’s many endemic species, which took their time to show, but mostly gave themselves up eventually – much to the relief and delight of the birding group.

We got off to a flying start with Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons flying over our landing beach, and many more were seen later along with Red-knobbed Imperials.

The noisy and widespread San Cristobel Melidectes took some time to show adequately for all, as did Makira Flycatcher, White-collared Monarch and Makira Cicadabird. Some got brief views of Shade Bush Warbler. There were striking Eclectus Parrots and several showy Dollarbirds to be had as well, and several Mottled Flowerpeckers.

A short ride back to the ship to re-hydrate and then we travelled in 5 Zodiacs to be greeted at Anuta. The whole village appears to have turned out, all the school children for sure were there. Four “very scary” warriors burst out of the undergrowth to challenge our arrival, but the greeting from the rest was in sharp contrast as each of us was given a garland of flowers. Speeches from all concerned lasted a while (!) and were followed by a much needed coconut drink before we were allowed to tour the village for an hour or so. The welcome was so charming that even hardened birders were moved!

A Pacific Baza soared peacefully over Anuta village, and a couple of Spinner Dolphins were seen on the trip back to *Spirit of Enderby*.

We set off then for Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal with very little seen by way of birds or sea-mammals.

Day 13: Wednesday 27 March

Honiara and Mount Austin – Solomon Islands

Chris’s morning call at 04:30 saw us anchored off Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. Ed and Damien had again got up earlier to provide us with a hearty breakfast before our day ashore. The first Zodiacs headed to shore at 06:00. Our local agent Wilson and his drivers were waiting for us and we transferred to three small buses for the trip up to Mount Austin.

After a quick briefing by Chris, we headed off into the forest. From the clearing at the top of the hill, the path dropped off steeply down into a river valley, followed shortly by a wide vista which provided good views over a large area of forest. Some time was spent here targeting birds and was the only place that the Buff-headed Coucal was seen (several others were heard, but not seen). As the track continued to drop into the valley it passed through a variety of habitats from areas of thick forest to regenerating forest and then small grassy clearings. The birding was just as productive as other Solomons forests, with the tally of targeted birds slowly increasing as the group moved further along the trail. Ultramarine Kingfisher was spotted and two birds stayed perched for some time allowing excellent views and photo opportunities. Most ended up with a pretty healthy bird list for the area, with highlights including great views of Blyth’s Hornbill, Cockerell’s Fantail, Pied Goshawk, Bluff-headed Coucal and Ultramarine Kingfisher. Two Oriental Hobbies hawked over the buses as we prepared to leave.

Those who didn’t want an early morning start headed into Honiara at 07:00 and spent the day exploring

the city. We started at the bustling market and moved on to the industrial waterfront and the humbling American World War II memorial and finished off with a walk in China town and an exploration of the remains of the botanic gardens.



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Day 14: Thursday 28 March Tetepare

A first visit for the *Spirit of Enderby* to the uninhabited island of Tetepare (the largest uninhabited island in the South Pacific). Several local guides were on hand to show the birding groups around the island, which has many good birds and one endemic white-eye species.

Both morning and afternoon excursions were made, as well as an after lunch snorkeling jaunt for those that wanted.

Solomon Sea Eagle drifted over our landing site, flute-like calls of White-capped Monarch were all around the small village, and the local Tetepare White-eye showed easily enough. There also appeared to be another white-eye present, with brighter plumage and seeming to be a bulkier bird. Good photos were obtained for future scrutiny.

Other excellent bird finds included Beach Thick-knee, Pacific Koel, Solomons Cicadabird, Variable Goshawk and Kolombangara Monarch.

Several large monitor lizards were also seen, including one with a fish tail stuck in the corners of its mouth.

The evening saw Chris once again briefing us on the expected birds of the next day's birding – on the island of Kolombangara.

Day 15: Friday 29 March Kolombangara Island

Another early morning wakeup call as we prepared for a big day on Kolombangara Island. By 07:00 we were ashore in Ringi Cove ready to be loaded into the trucks that would take us up onto the mountain and to visit the unique Imbu Rano Lodge. The Island has a very successful forestry and conservation management system which supplies sustainable hardwood production with significant areas of conservation land providing essential habitat to the wildlife.

The lodge proved an excellent viewing platform for bird watching in the slightly cooler mountain air. We remained here for some time, reluctant to break the spell, soaking up the extraordinary scenery. Great views of Pale Mountain Pigeon, and Solomon Islands White-eye were had at the lodge, and much more was seen on the access road. Sought after species such as Roviana Rail (seen by a lucky few) and Kolombangara Monarch, Duchess and Meek's Lorikeet (seen well by all) as well as a host of other endemics which had been seen previously, kept everyone happy.

The Solomon Islands gave us a great send off with some large pods of cetaceans: Fraser's and Spotted Dolphins (both 30+ animals) and a couple of Dwarf Sperm Whales. But the real bonus for the birders was the delaying orbit, which the skipper threw in, to help be in the right place at the right time for Heinroth's Shearwater. The maneuver worked so well! Everyone on deck got very good looks at several individuals.

After 5 days of landings on the fantastic Solomon Islands – each with its own particular charm – we were all ready for an early night and the prospect of a sleep-in until dawn...or for some a little later!



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Day 16: Saturday 30 March
At Sea, off the coast of Bougainville

A solid night's sleep was followed by the luxury of a 08:00 breakfast this morning. After five days of early starts it was much appreciated. At first light we were off the western coast of Bougainville over a very deep trench and enjoying the flat conditions, our expectations were high. The day proved to be a little disappointing with only a small number of birds, whales and dolphins seen. A possible explanation was the sea temperature. At 5 metres down in the hull at the engine water intake the temperature was 30°C! Any

fish life would be deep down to escape the heat, hence the lack of life at the surface.

Even so, the short bird list for the day included more Heinroth's Shearwater, Grey-backed Tern and a very out-of-range Flesh-footed Shearwater.

Day 17: Sunday 31 March
At Sea, off the coast of New Ireland

As the sun rose the *Spirit of Enderby* was just slowing to walking pace off Cap St George, New Ireland. This should be THE place for the enigmatic Beck's Petrel – previous passengers aboard the WPO making up 90% or more of all those that have ever seen the species.

Chris had produced a splendid mixture of fish oil, fish bits, popcorn, cornflakes and melon (!??) which was thrown into the very calm water and made a large obvious slick. Well, it was obvious to us, but not apparently to birds.....five Red-necked Phalaropes stopped briefly, a couple of Brown Boobies flew straight past it, but not a sign of our quarry for 2 hours. Some birders grabbed a quick breakfast, but many just stared at the empty sea hoping, waiting, (I guess some even praying?) but to no avail.

At about 09:00 the decision was made to move on up the coast of New Ireland and hope to run into the Beck's en route. This proved to be a master-stroke!!

It wasn't long before a distant Beck's Petrel was spotted and over the next couple of hours there were about 8 birds seen altogether. Some gave decent views, though most were a fair distance out. In amongst the bird sightings we had a remarkable run of cetaceans – no less than 6 species, including a good look at a Pygmy Sperm Whale and small calf, and a close beaked whale which showed well. This small beaked whale was initially thought to be a Blainville's, but might well turn out to be something much more interesting...

A couple of large pods of Pan-tropical Spotted and Spinner Dolphins were pleasing, as was a mixed group of Melon-headed Whales and False Killer Whales.

By lunchtime the glassy sea had become slightly choppy, the clouds gathered and there was even a brief, sharp downpour. Birds, mammals and fish became scarce, with a few Red-footed Boobies headlining the afternoon's list, as we headed North towards the "Dead Zone".

A spectacular waterspout out to the east caused a flurry of interest in the late afternoon.



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Day 18: Monday 1 April
At Sea

Maybe we should have taken more notice of the waterspout! Around midnight a (totally un-forecast) vicious tropical storm hit us. Lashing rain, large swells and a very uncomfortable rolling motion much more reminiscent of the Southern Ocean than right by the Equator, all combined to make a more-or-less sleepless night for most.

The rain and heavy seas did not abate until late afternoon, meaning that the planned crossing the Equator celebrations had to be cancelled.

Almost no birds and certainly no mammals were seen all day, but we were rewarded by being shown the first of 5 episodes of a wonderful film series about environmental issues in China, filmed, produced and directed by one of the passengers – Phil Agland.

Day 19: Tuesday 2 April
At Sea

Cool and choppy conditions through the day as we plodded northwards through the “Dead Zone”. The tail end of the previous day’s tropical storm kept conditions challenging – especially trying to spot cetaceans and small seabirds in the troughs and peaks. More birds than yesterday though, with the undisputed highlight being a single Bulwer’s Petrel. The supporting cast was mostly Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (including a couple of pale phase birds), an Arctic Skua and a White-tailed Tropicbird.

Once again Phil Agland saved us all from total despair with the second episode of his excellent documentary before lunch.

Chris supplied a semi-serious bird quiz for the bar/library and ended the day with an illustrated talk on the birds to be expected on Chuuk tomorrow and the next day.

Day 20: Wednesday 3 April
Weno Island, Caroline Islands

The ship had made excellent time through the night, so much so that we arrived outside Chuuk Lagoon too early and had to delay for a couple of hours to make our appointed time with the pilot.

Being suddenly close to land again brought a comparative glut of birds! Some rather different looking Tropical Shearwaters were present (surely each population, separated by hundreds of kilometers is a different taxon?). Also hundreds of Black and Brown Noddy and White Tern. New for the trip were Black-naped Terns.

Navigating through the lagoon, tying up at the Weno wharf and then clearing customs seemed to take an eternity, but it all eventually got done and allowed everyone to get on shore to stretch their legs. Between the spread groups of birders, in the 90 minutes or so of remaining day-light, they managed to find each of the 8 Micronesian endemics that occur on Weno, with most people seeing almost all of those 8.

Day 21: Thursday 4 April
Weno Island, Caroline Islands

The Spirit of Enderby spent the night tied up at Weno, and in the pre-dawn a hardy set of souls set off in 2 Zodiacs to make the 18 nautical mile journey to Tol South – home of 2 further endemics. A long and bumpy trip, followed by a steep and treacherous climb – but it turned out to be a successful and rewarding one with both Chuuk Monarch and Teardrop White-eye added to a few life lists.

The remaining birders took an easier option of minibus rides up to the area of “Japanese Gun” where all of the 8 island endemics were seen, plus Blue-faced Parrotfinch for a few. Many of these endemics – particularly Carolinian Reed-warbler, the stunning Micronesian Myzomela and Oceanic Flycatcher proved to be quite tame and showy.

Further forays into the bustle of Weno township completed the visit until the pilot came aboard at about 15:00 and then we were off again – sailing towards Japan (via another day or so of The Dead Zone!!!).

Sparkling wine for all pre-dinner, courtesy of Nigel Hacking who had just passed 5000 birds species. Cheers Nigel!!



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Day 22: Friday 5 April
At Sea

A rather breezy day, with bearable temperatures and a choppy, disturbed sea. For The Dead Zone this was a reasonably productive day with the undoubted highlight being several Bulwer's Petrels. All the normal tropical pelagics were also present in varying numbers – Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Red-footed and Brown Booby, Sooty and Bridled Tern. A couple of Arctic Skua winged their way northwards past us, hurrying up to their Arctic breeding grounds.

A Risso's Dolphin made a very brief appearance, and another episode of Phil Agland's film.



Day 23: Saturday 6 April

At Sea

Another Dead Zone day, but to everyone's surprise and pleasure it brought 2 new species for the voyage – Matsudaira's and Leach's Storm-petrel. The "Matsies" followed the ship all day at various ranges and there were up to 4 at any one time. The Leach's were less numerous with probably only 2 individuals seen.

Very little else of note, although the ratio of light to dark phase Wedge-tails seems to be shifting with more light birds showing today.

For many the highlight of today was the talk and subsequent tour of galley, freezers and storage, by Ed the chef, which was very well received.

Day 24: Sunday 7 April

At Sea

More or less a carbon copy of the previous day, with warm temperatures (e.g. the sea was 28 degrees Celsius), light breezes and a slight sea. Similar diversity of birds as well, with Matsies following the ship almost all day, sometimes close enough to satisfy even the most picky photographer.

Light phase Wedge-tailed Shearwaters outnumbered their dark cousins by about 10:1, but there were few avian highlights today – and no sea-mammals at all. The only addition to the voyage list was a brief Bonin Petrel which not everyone saw – not a worry since we are bound to enter their normal territory in a day or so.

The lecture room was almost full again as we watched the final episode of Phil's Chinese film in the early afternoon. Food for thought indeed.

Heidi and Ed gamely competed against each other in a daft bird name quiz in the bar after dinner, much to everybody's delight (except them of course!).

Day 25: Monday 8 April

At Sea to Bonin Islands

Today was the fourth of five sea days before the Bonin Islands, so some needed a bit of an enthusiasm transplant, because days were long at times. Those that persisted were well rewarded though – an early morning Christmas Shearwater was well seen by those on deck, as were a very close Omura's Whale and calf. Film/photos of the very young animal may be the first ever.

Matsudaira's Storm-petrels continued to follow the ship for most of the day, attracted by a fish-oil drip. A couple of big flocks of Bridled and Sooty Terns were well received, as was a single White Tern and the first couple of (what were called as) Bannerman's Shearwater. More of that to come in the next few days...

Day 26: Tuesday 9 April

At Sea to Bonin Islands

We awoke to a stiff northerly breeze which kept the air temperature well down, even in sunshine. All of a sudden we were back in "bird rich" waters with over a hundred Bonin Petrels seen – mostly flashing past but some giving great views of this very attractive *Pterodroma* petrel.

Matsudaira's Storm-petrels continued to follow the wake, but strangely kept their distance today, and large numbers of exclusively pale phase Wedge-tailed Shearwaters gave tremendous views as they almost posed for photographs alongside the ship.

In the slacker times many people took the opportunity to watch various flying-fish hunting techniques by 3 species of booby – with varying degrees of success. It seems that boobies could be assigned to species just by noting which method they employ to attack their flying fish lunch/dinner.

Bannerman's Shearwater!? Bryan's Shearwater!? Newell's Shearwater!? Some other sort of shearwater!? A massive conundrum built up with close views and good photos of at least two apparently different shearwater species. The consensus seems to be that there were "little-type" and "bigger-type" birds, and that the "littles" are probably Bannerman's and the "biggers" most closely resemble Newell's. More info required!!

Day 27: Wednesday 10 April **At Sea, en route to Chichi-jima**

Dawn saw us cruising past Haha-jima en route to Chichi-jima to clear customs for Japan. Large numbers of (presumably) Matsudaira's Storm-petrels were moving in the half-light, and it wasn't long before our first northern albatross species was spotted, the first of several Black-footed Albatross for the day.

Also in the early part of the morning we encountered lots of cetaceans – Short-beaked Common Dolphins rode the bow, Short-finned Pilot whales, Bottlenose Dolphins and a few Humpbacked Whales were also seen.

The *Spirit of Enderby* entered the calm water of the Chichi-jima harbour at about 11:00 and fairly soon the Japanese customs, immigration and bio-security team was on board. It took them 3 hours to clear all the passengers and the ship into Japan, but we managed to take lunch during that time and set off again. Birders out and about on deck saw a few Japanese Buzzards and a single Grey-faced Buzzard, and there were several Green Turtles close to the ship.

As we departed the harbour there were quite a few (8?) Humpbacks breaching and blowing ahead of us, with some allowing excellent views and photos.

A handful of Black-footed Albatross also put on a show, and another controversial small shearwater caused a stir as we headed towards the islet where Bryan's Shearwater is known to breed. Once in the right sort of area, things started to happen, and the 2 hours before nightfall were "interesting" to say the least. An addition to the trip list was Short-tailed Shearwater with 3 flashing past, and a flock of, mostly Wedge-tailed, shearwaters that were loafing about was seen to hold some smaller birds as well. Claim and counter-claim of Bryan's, Bannerman's etc followed, with many confused folk on all 3 decks. The discussion continued as photos were consulted, pored over and generally given the third degree, until the calling of the log...and for a while after that. I can't say that there was much agreement except that there were 3 different-looking sorts of birds that must have included Bannerman's Shearwater and might well have also included Bryan's. It seems that the sum of our knowledge is less than that required to put this conundrum to bed!

Day 28: Thursday 11 April **Off the coast of Haha-jima**

Waking up to rain and a rough sea was not what we wanted as we were anchored just off Haha-jima, itching to get ashore for some Japanese land-birds including the spectacular endemic Bonin Honey-eater. By 07:00 it was apparent that the much-anticipated landing just wasn't going to happen and so the painful decision to weigh anchor and set off north again was made. The poor ship's agent who had travelled from Tokyo to join the ship was left stranded on the island!

Not far from the island, in the midst of a rain squall, a Japanese Thrush flew around the ship, making a half-hearted attempt to land.

The afternoon saw much improved conditions and some remarkable bird observations. There were plenty of Black-footed and one Laysan Albatross to keep people on their toes, and then a large feeding flock of many hundred Wedge-tailed Shearwaters was spotted. Along with the steady stream of "Wedgies" passing there must have been well over a thousand in total.

For most birders the final great sight of the day was as unexpected as it was welcome. Quite a few Tristram's Storm-petrel were crossing the bow, giving some excellent views, but then we came across three flocks of Tristram's which might have held 5,000 birds altogether, at a distance looking like black midges on the surface of a lake. Only Hiro and Shoko were not surprised, having seen this phenomenon before.



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Day 29: Friday 12 April Birding off Torishima Island

Torishima! The isolated volcanic island where Short-tailed Albatross breeds. At dawn we were about 20 nm south and heading straight in. The island loomed ahead looking like a giant “Batman” symbol. Not long to wait before the first of the Short-tails pitched up, along with their Black-footed cousins. The Short-tails looked huge in comparison, and once adults were seen well with their golden-coloured head and neck everyone was impressed. The *Spirit of Enderby* went close in to the island and then headed out to 3 nm to allow chum into the water. Sav started to throw bits of cut-up fish, and fish offal into the waves. It didn't take too long before we had attracted a large crowd of seabirds behind the ship – up to 25 Short-tailed Albatross, a similar number of Black-footed Albatross and many Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

Some photographers claimed the birds were too close (!?), but all were seriously happy with the result. After the chum, we sailed back in to be close to the island and view one of the albatross colonies as well as the smoking (steaming?) caldera of the volcano. A truly remarkable place.

Lunch came and went, but few birds were apparent in the early afternoon as we proceeded towards Miyake-jima. A few albatrosses were seen, of both species, and a Barn Swallow caused a stir as it flitted around the top deck – but not as much interest as the Red-rumped Swallow which appeared a little later!

Streaked Shearwater steadily took over the common shearwater mantle from Wedge-tails which became scarce. A pod of Spotted Dolphins approached the ship for a short while, but they were the only mammals seen today.

There were two final surprises: first was a Great Egret miles from land of any sort, battering into the wind across the ocean, and then a Providence Petrel was seen a long way from “home” since it breeds at Lord

Howe Island!



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Day 30: Saturday 13 April
At Sea and off Miyake-jima

A rather rock 'n' roll night last night and first light found us still some way short of Miyake-jima. Sunshine though, rather than cloud and rain, but quite breezy. Scores of Streaked Shearwaters streaked across the waves, and the odd Short-tailed Albatross made a guest appearance.

This morning turned out to be one of mixed emotions and mixed success. During the night the Japanese authorities had rescinded their permission for us to deploy the Zodiacs for landings, so we were constrained to try to utilise local fishing boats to transfer to land. The choppy conditions were not in our favour, nor was the forecast for stronger winds. On advice from the locals, our EL quite rightly decided that it really wasn't prudent to risk the fishing boat scenario and so announced that we would not be going ashore – to the dismay of many on board.

A few consolation birds were had as we were waiting for the decision – Temminck's and Pelagic Cormorant and some very dapper Black-tailed Gulls.

Setting off from Miyake-jima towards the rock stacks nearby, where Japanese Murrelet are known to breed. Very soon everyone was having crippling views of the much sought-after species, and around 30 were seen, mostly within 50m of the ship.

The rest of the day was predictably a little slow, except for a couple of heart-racing moments captured on film – an apparent Long-billed Murrelet photographed, but not seen (and then another seen but not photographed!) and a series of photos of what must be a Beck's Petrel (or possibly a Tahiti Petrel). Either species would be new for Japan!!

We ended the day with an amazing and wonderful video/slideshow from Lisle, and an even better final dinner from Ed and Damien.

Day 31: Sunday 14 April
Yokohama, Japan

We arrived early morning into Yokohama. After arrival formalities and a final breakfast disembarkation commenced, some of us headed to the airport, and others extending their time away taking the opportunity to explore the Japanese mainland.

GROUP

PHOTO

#1976



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