

Seabirds of the Hunter Region

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Thirty-nine species of pelagic birds (Order Procellariiformes) are confirmed to have been recorded in the Hunter Region in the past 4 decades, together with an additional 19 oceanic/coastal species. The majority of records stem from surveys out to and beyond the continental shelf, departing variously from Swansea, Newcastle and Port Stephens. Those surveys commenced in August 2000; since then there have been more than 50 surveys up to March 2011. Of the total 58 species, some are reasonably common, present either all year or seasonally, whereas others are recorded much less frequently. The paper summarises the status of all 58 pelagic and oceanic/coastal species recorded in the Region. Where appropriate, the local breeding status is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Since late 2000, there have been many surveys to the continental shelf of the Hunter Region to record pelagic seabirds in the vicinity of the continental shelf and to record coastal/oceanic seabirds closer to shore. Some years, only a few surveys have taken place, other years they have occurred quite frequently (≥ 10 surveys in a calendar year). There were none in 2004 and relatively few in 2005-2008. The frequency has depended largely on the availability of suitable boats. The author participated in approximately 75% of the > 50 seabird surveys which have occurred in the past 11 years up to March 2011.

The highlights (with more detail sometimes) from most of those surveys have been published (Stuart 1994-2010, Stuart 2010b) and reported to on-line forums such as *birding-aus* and, more recently, *hunterbirding*. Such *ad hoc* reporting leaves a significant gap in terms of interpreting what the records tell us about which species are common, which are rare or vagrant, what months/seasons they are likely to be present, and their relative abundance. This paper attempts to rectify that gap by providing an overview.

Hunter Region records of seabirds prior to 2000 are scant and mainly involved either beach-washed or rescued birds; where such records are known (Stuart 1994-2010a), they have been used to aid the interpretations presented in this paper.

METHODS

Initially starting late 2000, survey boats departed from Swansea, then subsequently from Newcastle and now from Port Stephens (these changes were mainly governed by the availability of suitable boats). In some years, surveys departed from more than one of these ports. Most surveys involved 10-15 observers; a small number of them had only 2-3 observers on board.

The species and numbers of coastal/oceanic seabirds are recorded on the way out to and returning from the shelf in trips requiring 2-4 hours each way depending on the sea conditions, distance to the shelf (i.e. which port of departure), and cruising speed of the boat. Occasional stops are made to allow positive identification of uncommon birds. Upon clearing the shelf (occasionally proceeding 5-10 km further), the boat is allowed to drift for about 3 hours, while all species in the vicinity are recorded. Lures, such as chicken mince laced with fish oil and a cod liver oil soaked cloth, are used on most of the surveys; these attract many of the pelagic species to the boat for a time thus facilitating sometimes difficult identifications. Photographic images are used to help confirm the identifications.

Whilst the land boundaries of the Hunter Region are very precisely defined, the sea boundaries are a more arbitrary matter. One plausible definition for the southern limit is latitude $33^{\circ} 11'$, which corresponds to Flat Rocks (also called Flat Island), the southernmost headland in the Region. With this definition, some of the birds in the surveys from Swansea were recorded marginally south of the Region, depending on how far to the south-east the boat went. All results from those surveys are included in the analysis, since for much of the time they were conducted within the Region and never very far out of it. In any event, the surveys ex Swansea have not produced separate lists for species

recorded within and just outside the Region and so it is not easy to exclude any records.

Seabird identification can be difficult. All local reports are reviewed by a panel of HBOC experts; only those records accepted by that panel have been included in the analysis below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A series of seven categories has been used to describe qualitatively the status of seabirds in the Region: Accidental, Rare, Uncommon, Irregular, Regular, Common, Very Common. This series progressively reflects the increasing presence and abundance of birds during the seasons that they are present.

Pelagic Birds

Thirty-nine pelagic species (Order Procellariiformes, comprising the storm-petrels, albatrosses, prions, shearwaters and petrels) have been recorded in the Hunter Region (summarised in **Table 1**). Nine species are considered Accidental, compared with 17 species which are Common or Regular. The other 13 species range from Rare to Irregular in their occurrence.

Coastal/Oceanic Birds

Nineteen species have been recorded (excluding species which are mostly only found very close to shore e.g. gulls and some terns) (summarised in **Table 2**). Eight species are considered to be Accidental, compared with just six species which are Common or Regular.

Breeding

Of the 58 species in **Tables 1** and **2**, only seven are known to breed locally (Lane 1976, BirdLife International 2007, Stuart 1994-2010a). The main locations are islands within Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park (in particular, Broughton, Little Broughton, Boondelbah, and Cabbage Tree Islands). Some species also breed on Moon Island near Swansea and Stasis Island near Seal Rocks.

White-faced Storm-Petrel *Pelagodroma marina*: ~140 pairs regularly breed on Boondelbah Island, and a breeding population was recently found on Little Broughton Island. Historically, there was a large breeding population on Broughton Island.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacificus*: ~13,000 pairs breed each year on Boondelbah Island and ~1,050 pairs on Cabbage Tree Island.

Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*: ~2,500 pairs breed each year on Boondelbah Island and ~45 pairs on Cabbage Tree Island).

Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*: A breeding population was recently found on Little Broughton Island, and there are historical records.

Gould's Petrel *Pterodroma leucoptera*: ~ 1,000 pairs breed regularly on Cabbage Tree Island and 30 pairs on Boondelbah Island. Very recently, breeding populations have been discovered on Broughton and Little Broughton Islands (numbers of pairs not known).

Little Penguin *Eudyptula minor*: ~100 pairs breed each year on Boondelbah Island and ~140 pairs on Cabbage Tree Island, as well as many pairs on Broughton Island, Little Broughton Island, and some on Stasis and Moon Islands.

Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*: There are breeding colonies on most offshore islands, some being quite large (1000+ pairs). Also breeds on sand islands in Swansea Channel and Wallis Lake.

CONCLUSIONS

The oceans of the Hunter Region host a rich variety of seabird life, occupying both pelagic and oceanic/coastal habitats. Many of these species are present regularly, usually seasonally, whilst other species are uncommon or vagrants to the area.

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Table 1. Pelagic birds (Order Procellariiformes) recorded in the Hunter Region.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Status	Comments
Wilson's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	Regular, all year	Present unpredictably at the shelf.
White-faced Storm-Petrel	<i>Pelagodroma marina</i>	Regular, all year	Often present at the shelf.
Black-bellied Storm-Petrel	<i>Fregatta tropica</i>	Uncommon	Seven records at the shelf since 2002 – three in October, also April, July and August.
White-bellied Storm-Petrel	<i>Fregatta grallaria</i>	Rare	Records of single birds at the shelf in March 2006, January 2007 and March 2010.
New Zealand Storm-Petrel	<i>Pealeornis maoriana</i>	Accidental	A single bird was recorded at the shelf in March 2010 (the first Australian record).
Wandering Albatross	<i>Diomedea exulans</i>	Regular, in winter	60-70% of records are Gibson's Albatross <i>D. e. gibsoni</i> ; 30-40% Antipodean Albatross <i>D. e. antipodensis</i> ; Snowy Albatross <i>D. e. exulans</i> is rarely confirmed.
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	Common, in winter	Regularly recorded during May-November, including from land. Sub-species <i>T. m. impavida</i> and <i>T. m. melanophrys</i> both recorded; the former is marginally more common.
Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta</i>	Regular, in winter	Almost always recorded when >5 km offshore during April-October (mainly <i>T. c. cauta</i> and <i>T. c. steadi</i> , the latter marginally more common; single <i>T. c. salvini</i> occasionally).
Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i>	Very Common, in winter	Regularly recorded (sometimes >30 birds) during May-November, including from land.
Buller's Albatross	<i>Thalassarche bulleri</i>	Accidental	Two birds at the shelf in August 2003 and a single bird there in January 2007.
Southern Giant-Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Regular, in winter	Small numbers of immature birds recorded June-October each year, including from land. A white phase bird (age therefore uncertain) was present off Swansea in August 2002.
Northern Giant-Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>	Regular, in winter	Small numbers of immature birds between June and October each year, including from land.
Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	Regular, in winter	Small to moderate numbers of birds between July and October in most years.
Broad-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila vittata</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a beach-cast bird in July 1973.
Antarctic Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a single bird at the shelf in August 2000.
Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	Accidental	The only records are from August-October 2002.
Fairy Prion	<i>Pachyptila turtur</i>	Regular, in winter	Birds often recorded over June-September, but are absent in some years. Several hundred birds sometimes present, although numbers vary considerably from year to year.
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	Accidental	Only records are a beach-cast bird December 1968 and a bird at the shelf August 2003.
Black Petrel	<i>Procellaria parkinsoni</i>	Rare, in summer	Five records of single birds at the shelf: November 2000, March and October 2006, January 2007, October 2010.
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna pacifica</i>	Very Common, in summer	Around 20,000 birds present September to mid April, with birds arriving mid August.
Buller's Shearwater	<i>Ardenna bulleri</i>	Accidental	The only records from at sea are single birds January 2000 and 2001. Single birds were on Cabbage Tree Island April and December 1995.

Table 1. Pelagic birds (Order Procellariiformes) recorded in the Hunter Region (cont.).

Common Name	Scientific Name	Status	Comments
Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna carneipes</i>	Common, in summer	100+ birds are present offshore from October, departing late March – early April.
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	Irregular, in summer	Birds are present over September-February; most reports are of single birds.
Short-tailed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna tenuirostris</i>	Very Common in spring	Tens of thousands pass through during the September-November migration period. Some are recorded from July/August, and small numbers throughout summer/early autumn.
Streaked Shearwater	<i>Calonectris leucomelas</i>	Rare, in summer	All records are from within ~5km from shore, and only in March (2000, 2006, 2010 and 2011; 2 birds were present in 2010).
Fluttering Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gavia</i>	Common in winter/spring; Regular remainder of year	Many thousands sometimes present; all the very high counts (up to 10,000 birds) occur July to September, and many hundreds of birds recorded during October and November.
Hutton's Shearwater	<i>Puffinus huttoni</i>	Irregular, all year	Several hundreds of birds sometimes present late August to October; much lesser numbers in other months. Probably sometimes overlooked.
Little Shearwater	<i>Puffinus assimilis</i>	Accidental	A single bird was at the shelf January 2007. Beach-cast birds February and March 2002.
Tahiti Petrel	<i>Pseudobulweria rostrata</i>	Rare, in summer	Two birds in January 2001 and single birds in February 1997, February 2001 and March 2010, all from the shelf.
Juan Fernandez Petrel	<i>Pterodroma externa</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a bird rescued ashore in October 1988.
Kermadec Petrel	<i>Pterodroma neglecta</i>	Rare, in summer	Birds were at the shelf in February 2001, April 2005 (3 birds) and March 2006 (5 birds).
White-headed Petrel	<i>Pterodroma lessonii</i>	Rare, in winter/spring	The only records are from the shelf – several birds in August 2003 and single birds in September 2002, July 2003 and June 2010.
Great-winged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma macroptera</i>	Regular, in summer	Birds often recorded at the shelf over mid August - early April. Most records are <10 birds; however, much higher counts are common in October.
Providence Petrel	<i>Pterodroma solandri</i>	Common, in autumn to spring	Birds are commonly recorded at the shelf between March and October. Most counts are of 10-30 birds although the numbers sometimes are higher (up to 200 birds).
Gould's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma leucoptera</i>	Regular, in summer	Single birds are moderately often recorded at the shelf over October–April.
Cook's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma cookii</i>	Accidental	Only two records – a beach-cast bird December 1971 and a bird at the shelf October 2006.
White-necked Petrel	<i>Pterodroma cervicalis</i>	Rare, in summer	Six records since 2001 of birds at the shelf – three January records, two from February and one from March.
Black-winged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma nigripennis</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a single bird at the shelf in January 2007.
Pycroft's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma pycrofti</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a single bird at the shelf in October 2002.

Table 2. Coastal/oceanic birds recorded in the Hunter Region.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Status	Comments
Red-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon rubricauda</i>	Accidental	Occasional records of beach-cast or rescued birds.
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Accidental	Occasional records of beach-cast or rescued birds.
Little Penguin	<i>Eudyptula minor</i>	Resident	Small numbers are often recorded close to the coast and the offshore islands.
Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>	Accidental	Six records (including 3 individuals in 1957), all except 2 of them are of beach-cast birds.
Australasian Gannet	<i>Morus serrator</i>	Very Common, in winter	Many hundreds are present within ~10 km of shore during March-October. Young birds often forage close to shore including in sheltered waters such as Port Stephens.
Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>	Accidental	Three records – single birds taken into care in August 1985 and March 2008, and ~15km offshore in March 2010.
Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a beach-cast bird in September 1979.
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Rare, in summer	Four records – of small numbers in December 1984, October 1986, May 1991, March 2010.
Brown Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	Irregular, all year	1-2 birds occasionally recorded – mostly over July-September but there are two recent February records.
Pomarine Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	Regular, in summer	Up to 10 birds regularly from October to early April, including sometimes from land.
Arctic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Regular, in summer	Small numbers regularly between September and early April, mostly from inshore and around harbours and estuaries but occasionally from further offshore.
Long-tailed Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	Irregular, in summer	1-2 are occasionally recorded from September to early April, inshore and at the shelf.
Common Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Rare, in summer	Several records of single birds in 2008-2010, all in March; prior to that there are only two known occurrences (November 1977, January 1999). Most sightings were from land.
Black Noddy	<i>Anous minutus</i>	Accidental	The only records are of single birds at the shelf in January 2004 and January 2007.
White Tern	<i>Gygis alba</i>	Accidental	The only record is of a single bird at the shelf in March 2003.
Grey Ternlet	<i>Procelsterna cerulea</i>	Accidental	Single birds at the shelf March 2002 and off Booti Booti NP February 1995 (after storms).
Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscata</i>	Uncommon, in summer	Many records in January 2007 (some of multiple birds) and in early 2010; prior to that were only occasional records but including one record of 7+ birds.
White-fronted Tern	<i>Sterna striata</i>	Regular, in winter	1-2 birds are often at the shelf as well as inshore in winter (greater numbers are known to roost at some favoured sites).
Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	Common, all year	Most records are from near the coast; however, a few birds are often at the shelf.