



Trip Report - Cape Town Pelagics - Saturday, 17 September 2022

Trip Highlights: Northern Royal Albatross, Soft-plumaged Petrel, Cape Petrel, Sabine's Gull, Long-tailed Jaeger and breaching group of Humpback Whales.



We departed from Simon's Town harbour on Saturday morning with calm conditions in False Bay, but the swell and wave height picked up around Cape Point. It remained fairly bumpy for much of the trip with moderate winds, but the spirits of the crowd were not to be dampened, with many first-time pelagic birders on board eagerly awaiting their first sea bird! Through the day the wind ranged from 10 – 15 knots from the southwest, and the swell ranged from 2.5m to 3m. The water temperature was 17 degrees. At our furthest point, we were 22 nautical miles from Cape Point, with the trawler located at E 34:36, S 18:15.

Beyond the Point, after the obligatory photo stop, the pelagic bird species started to show themselves but in fairly low numbers. We had modest numbers of **White-chinned Petrels**, **Sooty Shearwaters** and occasional **Shy** and **Black-browed Albatrosses**, with numerous **Cape Gannets**, and **Cape Cormorants** around the Point. We had a brief glimpse of an uncooperative **Humpback Whale** on the way out. Considering the fairly depleted numbers of birds beyond the Point, I started to

entertain vague hopes that there might be a trawler or two waiting for us, and drawing in the birds. After coasting south, we headed towards an unspecified vessel, which then revealed herself to be a trawler, with much excitement and anticipation on board, and little did we know that we'd find another three in the general area. We spent most of our time with two of them, timing it between the nets being lifted and the catch processed. The group was treated to the true spectacle of pelagic birding off Cape Town, with extraordinary numbers of birds enjoyed, following the trawlers and coming in from seemingly every imaginable angle. The windy conditions also played into our hands, with exceptional sea bird activity and movement.

We had four species of Albatross during the day, including numerous **Shy Albatross** and **Black-browed Albatross**, in both juvenile and adult plumages. **Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross** proved trickier, but we finally managed to connect with one bird seen well by everyone on board. Giant Petrels were also curiously scarce. We had a brief view of a probable adult Southern, but could only confirm a single **Northern Giant Petrel**, seen well by the group, and demonstrating its reddish-orange bill tip. We also enjoyed numerous sightings of **Cape (Pintado) Petrel**, which is always a winner, and there were a few **Wilson's Storm Petrels** going by, in small numbers. A single **Great Shearwater** shot through the feeding frenzy briefly.

Another interesting feature of the day was the presence of a few summer migrants. In addition to **Common Terns**, we also had at least three **Sabine's Gulls** near the trawlers.

But the highlight of the trawling grounds was only to come towards the end of the morning, when our sharp-eyed skipper called me to say he saw a great albatross sitting in the water, and we were treated to views of a spectacular immature **Northern Royal Albatross** sitting squabbling over scraps with two **Shy Albatrosses**! The group enjoyed excellent albeit fairly brief views of this magnificent giant of the southern oceans, showing off its jet-black upper wings.



Northern Royal Albatross © John Savageau

On the way back to Cape Town we had a brief sighting of an adult non-breeding plumaged **Long-tailed Jaeger**, and a distant view of a probable dark morph **Parasitic Jaeger** harassing a group of Terns. **Subantarctic (Brown) Skuas** were a constant feature of the trawling ground activity. At one stage, an **Oceanic Sunfish** provided a brief, but well-received non-birding distraction.

After leaving the trawlers, we thought most of the excitement was over for the day... and we were wrong! In addition to being treated to some close-up flyby views of acrobatic **Soft-plumaged Petrels** (which proved to be common on our way back although not seen at all during the morning), we came upon a group of four adult **Humpback Whales**, with a calf seen briefly. This group put on a magnificent show for us, with incredible surface behaviour manifested by repeated breaching and fin slapping. It was a privilege to watch these majestic animals out at sea at close range (but maintaining appropriate distance), for at least half an hour. And judging from the reactions of the clients on board, this proved to be one of the highlights of the day! Of interest was that a **Soft-plumaged Petrel** followed the group of whales for the entire duration of their surface behaviour.



Humpback Whale © Michael Mandy

On route back to the harbour we enjoyed one of Alan's famous lunches (prepared by his better half - wife Lynn) and made a stop to see the **Cape and Bank Cormorant** colonies. Two **Crowned Cormorants** were also seen, and we made a quick stop at the **Cape Fur Seal** colony. Coastal birds also included numerous **Kelp Gulls**, a few **Hartlaub's Gulls** and two **African Oystercatchers**. A few small rafts of critically endangered **African Penguins** also drifted past.

Pelagic species seen and approximate numbers:

Northern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea sanfordi</i>	1
Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta</i>	2000+
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	2000+
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche carteri</i>	2
Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>	1
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procelleria aequinoctialis</i>	500
Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	30
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	250
Great Shearwater	<i>Ardenna gravis</i>	1
Soft-plumaged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma mollis</i>	5
Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	3
Long-tailed Jaeger	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	1
Brown (Subantarctic) Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	12
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>	3

Coastal species seen and approximate numbers:

Cape Gannet	<i>Morus capensis</i>	100+
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	50
Hartlaub's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus hartlaubii</i>	5
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>	5
Bank Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax neglectus</i>	14
Cape Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	200+
African Penguin	<i>Spheniscus demersus</i>	10
Great Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	20
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10

Marine mammals:

Brown (Cape) Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus</i>	20
Humpback Whales	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	7

Trip report by Cape Town Pelagics guide, Garret Skead.

A message from Cape Town Pelagics: A huge thank you to our experienced skippers who are able to safely lead us to the best birding areas and skillfully manoeuvre the boat into just the best position while all on board are busy concentrating on the birds! Coordinating a pelagic trip over a year in advance with guests from all across South Africa and different countries around the world requires an organised office team. We thank them for their special eye for detail - and for the sometimes last-minute rearrangements and frustration if the weather delays the trip to another day! Our biggest thank-you is to our Cape Town Pelagics guides who take time out of their work, often involving seabirds and conservation, and time away from their families, to provide our guests with a world-class birding experience. Cape Town Pelagics donates all its profits to seabirds, and so all the participants who join the trip make a contribution towards bird research and conservation - a big thank you from all of us.



Northern Royal Albatross © Michael Mandy