



## Trip Report - Cape Town Pelagics - Saturday, 12 August 2023

**Trip Highlights:** Four Albatross species, Cape Petrels, Southern Giant Petrel, Soft-plumaged Petrels and Humpback Whales.



Cape Town has lived up to its stormy name this winter. The rains and volatile fronts have meant a good, cold season, but has also kept us from going to sea for many recent weekends. But today was calm, clearing from overnight rain and the seabirds were calling us. Excitement and expectations were high as we set off from Simon's Town in the gloomy dawn with our skipper having gleaned some good insight as to where to potentially find a trawler.

A **Greater Crested** Tern landed on a buoy right next to us as we sailed off past a raft of **Cape Cormorants** lined up ready to head out for a day's foraging.

We made our way to Cape Point in great sea conditions; **Kelp Gulls** wheeling around us and **Greater Crested Terns** easily keeping pace. We kept an eye out for African Penguins but other than distant dots on Boulders Beach, there were none to be seen foraging at this point. As the sun rose and started breaking through the clouds, Alan saw some blows ahead and we soon found ourselves close to a group of about **8 Humpback Whales**. We quietly watched their giant backs appearing out of the water and massive tails arcing before a dive. As days go, that's a pretty good way to start one.

We stopped at Cape Point for our safety check and to get some info on any trawlers. The swirling waters around the spectacular point were calm and we got our first glimpses of **Sooty Shearwaters**, although they stayed quite far away. Streams of **Cape Cormorants** could be seen in the distance, flying low over the waves, heading out for a day's foraging.

With some good trawler news, we headed out towards the deep, soon picking up **White-chinned Petrels**, wheeling in their distinctive arcs between waves and sky.

We were still close to Cape Point when a Shy Albatross came to inspect us and these massive birds soon became a regular feature of our journey, accompanying us all the way.

A **Cape Gannet** flew directly overhead, and we were soon in the midst of a sea that was teeming with life. Sooty shearwaters and White-Chinned Petrels were everywhere and scores of Kelp Gulls flew overhead along with plenty of Greater Crested Terns and a couple of smaller, paler **Common Terns**. A flash of dappled black and white revealed that the **Cape (Pintado) Petrels** were certainly still around, and they soon joined the list of regulars. Suddenly a much smaller, more fluttery, grey, pointed-winged bird appeared off our bow. It took a moment in the light to see what it was, but with a quick twirl, it revealed a bright white underside and a grey neck collar – we were in luck with a most obliging **Soft-Plumaged Petrel** – not an everyday sight by any means! These small Pterodroma petrels are firm favourites of mine, and I was delighted for everyone to have such good views.

We were in for more luck though. We had a trawler on the horizon and as we approached, things started to get really exciting. The numbers of birds suddenly increased and we picked up our first **Black-Browed Albatross** who had been conspicuous in their absence, but soon certainly made up for it. In amongst the melee of Shy and Black Browed albatrosses we started to pick up the smaller, dark-billed **Indian Yellow-Nosed Albatross** together with an entire flotilla of perfectly dappled **Cape (Pintado) Petrels**.

The trawler started to raise its nets, giving us a good view of a group of **Brown (Subantarctic) Skuas** dancing on the nets, squabbling for scraps.

We scanned the many Shy and Black Browed Albatrosses, White chinned Petrels, Cape Petrels and Sooty Shearwaters for anything out of the ordinary and after a good search found the first of several **Atlantic Yellow-Nosed Albatrosses**. Four albatross species in one day is certainly a celebration!

There were thousands of birds – uncountable numbers of albatrosses and dozens of Cape Petrels wheeling around us continually. It's hard to make sense of such an assault on the senses. But we sat with them, on the outskirts of the throng and watched the squabbling, snacking and snoozing.

We indulged in the spectacle of birds for a good while, but eventually needed to head back to Simon's Town. We'd been missing the Giant Petrels. It's unusual not to see them at a trawler. We'd got a faraway glimpse of one, but it wasn't identifiable. However, close to Cape Point a **Southern Giant Petrel** flew past and represented this group.

A young Humpback whale gave us a spectacular show, breaching multiple times and slapping its fins on the water. It appeared to be playing with us – leaping half out of the water directly to starboard, disappearing for a minute and doing it again on port or off the bow or stern. To have such a large, wild animal be so at ease around us is wonderful and these experiences are not to be forgotten. Eventually with a flick of a massive tail, we were left alone again to continue our journey.

We stopped for a light lunch in the calm waters of False Bay, seeing a pair of **African Oystercatchers** on the beach and a small flock of **Ostriches** on shore – always a fun addition to a pelagic day out. A couple of **African Penguins** popped up out of the water next to us and **Hartlaub's Gulls** dropped out of the sky to catch a morsel on a wave. Finally, we paused at the rocks at Partridge Point for **Bank Cormorants** which seem to be very busy nesting, their breeding plumage white backs on show. A single **Crowned Cormorant** sat on its own, as is their preference and spattering of **White-breasted Cormorants** made up the remainder.

And so, finally to shore, happy and content after another spectacular day at sea where these treasures usually go unseen.

**Pelagic species seen and approximate numbers:**

Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta</i>	750+
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	750+
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche carteri</i>	20
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i>	6
Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	1
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procelleria aequinoctialis</i>	1000+
Soft-plumaged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma mollis</i>	2
Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	150
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	1000+
Brown (Subantarctic) Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	8

**Coastal species seen and approximate numbers:**

Cape Gannet	<i>Morus capensis</i>	50
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	250
Hartlaub's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus hartlaubii</i>	4
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>	8
Bank Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax neglectus</i>	24
Cape Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	200
Crowned Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo coronatus</i>	2
African Penguin	<i>Spheniscus demersus</i>	2
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	30
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	2
African oystercatcher	<i>Haemotopus moquini</i>	2



Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1
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**Marine mammals:**

Brown (Cape) Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus</i>	40
Humpback Whales	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	9

Trip report: Cape Town Pelagics guide, [Vanessa Stephen](#)

GALLERY:



Sooty Shearwater



Black-browed Albatross



Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross



Cape (Pintado) Petrel



White-chinned Petrel



Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross



Shy Albatross



**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 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 contribute towards bird research and conservation - a big thank you from all of us.

