



Trip Report - Cape Town Pelagics - Saturday, 10 February 2024

Trip Highlights: Four Albatross species, Spectacled Petrel, Red Phalaropes, Parasitic Jaeger, two Storm Petrel species.



It was touch and go as to whether we could go out to sea on Saturday. There was a large swell, and the wind was predicted to pick up in the afternoon. Sunday was very windy so was not an option. So, when the charts showed a pelagic-sized gap in the weather volatility, we jumped at it! Excited, we set off with a full boat of birders from Simon's Town with Alan, our skipper having gleaned some good insight as to where to potentially find a trawler.

We made our way to Cape Point; **Kelp Gulls** wheeling around us and **Greater Crested Terns** easily keeping pace. A couple of smaller **Common Terns** flew adjacent to us for a while, low against the water. Not far from the Simon's Town harbour two heads popped out of the slightly choppy water – **African Penguins!** We were close to Boulders Beach where they breed, and we could see the distant dots of those on shore, but it's not always easy to pick them up in the water.

As we neared Cape Point, the swells were definitely increasing – this was going to be a fun trip out. Big waves unfortunately slow down our progress, but seabirds use the momentum to help them fly, so we were hoping for a good show. And we weren't to be disappointed. We were still well within False Bay when we came across the first of many **Cory's Shearwaters** – a surprise for me as I wasn't expecting pelagic species this close to shore. As the sun rose a little higher and the light improved we could see their pale bills and the gorgeous scalloping of the dark feather edges on their backs and wings. They soared past the boat nice and close, giving us wonderful views. They were joined by a close trio of adult **Cape Gannets**, another species that we usually see a bit further out. The ocean was bringing them all in! Another nice surprise was a **Parasitic Jaeger** chasing **Greater Crested Terns** for their fish. It passed across the bow of the boat before being lost in the swell.

We stopped at Cape Point for our safety check and to get some info on any trawlers. The swell was significant, but we didn't get much in the way of new species here, although we saw another distant Jaeger, bothering more terns towards the Cape of Good Hope.

With some good trawler news, we headed out towards the deep, the Cory's Shearwaters keeping us company. Soon the slim, silvery under winged **Sooty Shearwaters** joined the Cory's Shearwaters, although their numbers remained fairly low throughout the day. Alan the skipper picked up a **Manx Shearwater**, but it disappeared into the waves before everyone managed to get on to it. But we all saw the increasingly common **White-chinned Petrels**, wheeling in their distinctive arcs between waves and sky.

We weren't too far from a trawler when we saw the first of what was to be a good number of **Wilson's Storm Petrels**, a tiny black bird with a bright, white rump. They are difficult to get on to as they're so small, erratic and speedy.

We had the trawler in our sights and were making headway in the up and down of the waves. A brown and white shearwater with a white rump and a dusky belly skirted past at 3 o'clock – a **Great Shearwater**. These birds are not a fisherman's favourite with their ability to dive deep for food and their propensity to take bait, but they are stunning little birds and a sign of summer and we were big fans. Another summer visitor soon joined in good numbers, the beautifully patterned **Sabine's Gulls**. We had good views of these birds bobbing up and down on the waves as well as flying past singly or in small groups.



Great Shearwater

I was wondering where the albatrosses were. There had been a few empty patches of ocean, but the amount of life was increasing as we neared the fishing vessel. A few of us had a tantalizing glimpse of what we can only think was a **Soft-plumaged Petrel**, but we were given the shortest glimpse of the back of the bird as it disappeared behind a wave, so we were unfortunately unable to confirm. However, when the wave subsided, suddenly the mighty form of a **Shy Albatross** emerged – with the bird flying right to our boat to investigate. The albatrosses made us wait today, but they were going to make up for it!

Our trawler was not lifting any nets, but there were decent numbers of birds in the vicinity. We very soon picked up our first **Black-browed Albatrosses**. There seemed to be a high number of sub-adult birds around, but the bright orange-yellow bill of the adults stood out fairly frequently. Searching between the Shy and Black Browed Albatrosses, we were looking for the dark bill of the yellow-nosed Albatrosses and before too long we were treated to a close fly-by by an adult **Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross**. These birds are by no means guaranteed so we were thrilled to see them. The flash of white wingtips in sturdy brown wings introduced a **Brown (Subantarctic) Skua**, one of which almost landed on the boat. Their gregarious nature and lack of any shyness is quite a treat out in these vast waters.

And then – a group of six or seven small birds skirted the bow of the boat with dark backs and white primaries. What a treat to see **Red Phalaropes**! They are far from an everyday occurrence on these pelagics.



Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross

The trawler remained inactive, but new birds kept coming to check the scene and we were lucky with decent views of an **Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross**. We didn't see many more of these but four albatross species in one day is certainly a celebration!

The storm petrels were becoming more common and we were able to check many to confirm **Wilson's Storm Petrel** again as well as the **European Storm Petrel**. Both species were busy scouting the waves for tiny food morsels. It's always astonishing how such tiny birds manage to live in these waters and the much more volatile ocean to the south. Quite remarkable.

We'd done well in seeing all these species but could we do more? There were large rafts of **White-chinned Petrels** on the waves and Alan moved the boat slowly around all the rafts as we looked for the tell-tale white eye rings of a rarity. And finally, there one was! Alan's sharp eyes picked out the bird in a thousand, a **Spectacled Petrel**. It remained on the water comfortably, close to the boat giving everyone great views.



Spectacled Petrel

We indulged in the spectacle of birds for a good while, with Skuas, Common Terns and Sabines Gulls flying by, but eventually needed to head back to Simon's Town. The winds were increasing, and the forecast was for rapidly deteriorating conditions in the afternoon. The swell however, had decreased, so our trip back towards Cape Point was a little quicker and more comfortable. We'd been missing the Giant Petrels. It's unusual not to see them at a trawler. They remained elusive this day, but we will find them on the next pelagic.

We stopped for a light lunch in the calmer waters of False Bay; a pair of **African Oystercatchers** calling shrilly as they flew past. **Hartlaub's Gulls** bobbed about on waves near the shore. Finally, we paused at the rocks at Partridge Point for endangered **Bank Cormorants**. These dark birds choose the highest points of the boulders where they build their nests. Today they were joined by a large group of **Cape Cormorants** and a couple of **White-breasted Cormorants** made up the remainder. We searched the nearby rocks for the small, less social **Crowned Cormorant**, but they were missing. A quick tour of Simon's Town harbour didn't reveal any either. But when walking back to the Yacht Club, happily preening and only 20m away sat a single **Crowned Cormorant** to complete the set.

And so, to shore, happy and content after another spectacular day at an increasingly choppy sea. We had timed this just right.

Pelagic species seen and approximate numbers:

Shy Albatross	<i>Thalassarche cauta</i>	100+
Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	75+
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche carteri</i>	4
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche chlororhynchos</i>	2
Red Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	7
White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	1000+
Spectacled petrel	<i>Procellaria conspicillata</i>	1
Soft-plumaged Petrel (unconfirmed)	<i>Pterodroma mollis</i>	1
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	750
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	400+
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>	700
Brown (Subantarctic) Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	10
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	1
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	3
Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	25
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	20
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>	40

Coastal species seen and approximate numbers:

Cape Gannet	<i>Morus capensis</i>	50
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	150
Hartlaub's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus hartlaubii</i>	30
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>	3
Bank Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax neglectus</i>	12
Cape Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	50
Crowned Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo coronatus</i>	1
African Penguin	<i>Spheniscus demersus</i>	2
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	30
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10
African oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus moquini</i>	2
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1

Marine mammals:

Brown (Cape) Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus</i>	100
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Trip report: Cape Town Pelagics guide, [Vanessa Stephen](#)



Shy Albatross - underwing



Brown (Subantarctic) Skua



Shy Albatross



Black-browed 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 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.