



THE WESTERN PACIFIC ODYSSEY 2019

Tauranga to Yokohama

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The Western Pacific Odyssey March 2019

We arrived in New Zealand a day early (just to be on the safe side), changed planes in Auckland for the short flight (half an hour) to Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty where the Spirit of Enderby was berthed. Ahead of us we had 4 weeks on the boat covering 5500 miles back to Japan- this part of its relocation voyage from the NZ sub-antarctic waters in their summer, to Russia for their arctic voyages in the northern hemisphere summer. The route we followed led to us to Norfolk Island off Australia, New Caledonia- almost another French province, then on to the Solomon Islands where we had 5 landings. After crossing the equator we headed on to Chuuk in the Carolines- part of the Federated States of Micronesia, then sailing on to the Bonin and Izu islands of Japan before making landfall in Yokohama.

Now the Spirit of Enderby provokes many a love/hate relationship. It's an old Russian spy vessel built in Finland in 1982 and has been converted into an expedition boat. Some people love its small size- only 50 passengers and its ability to handle any seas and conditions with its ice strengthened hull. Others hate it for its lack of stabilisers (in rough seas it rolls 25 degrees and can be really dangerous for its elderly clientele- In mild seas it only rolls 5-10 degrees- gentle in comparison but you need to heed the adage- one hand for you and one for the boat. Everything is fairly basic- even the better cabins are nothing special- you just have to remind yourself – this not a holiday it is an expedition. The galley is unbelievably small and you just had to compliment the two male chefs for the excellent grub they produced every day.

There is a lot of birding space- all of it pretty uncomfortable. You can bird from the bow (in gentle to moderate seas) as they otherwise close that deck- the photographers preferred this deck and you had to be up early to get one of the prime spots on the bow itself. The non-photographers chose the monkey deck above the bridge with commanding views for 180 degrees up front. Otherwise you could just sit on the bridge and watch the long lenses point first one way and then another to see exactly where the birds were. The rear deck was little used except when chumming as the birds never followed the boat and there was a good chance of getting your feet wet even in gentle seas.

Our fellow travellers were an interesting bunch- 22 Brits with Wildwings- Mainly men in their sixties without their long suffering wives. All extremely good and keen birders who had travelled the world, several with lists into the 7-8000's. One chap said he was on 7900 in 1999 when he stopped counting and he said he had done a "few" trips since then. Everyone kept asking him if he had passed his 9000 yet? and never got an answer. There were a handful of Aussies, a couple of New Zealanders, a few from the States, a young Japanese couple and us – the only South Africans. So of the 50 passengers at least 40 were keen birders- I mean when you are only ashore a possible 9 days of 28- what else would you do? Well a couple were keen Cetacean watchers- something which simply does not inspire me- I mean how can you get excited by a blow and a fin here and the glimpse of a flipper, fluke and tail there? I noticed the keen birders never left their posts when someone called a blow on the other side of the boat!

Now 40 keen birders on a boat is manageable but 40 on land is a different matter. We had 3 guides who were in radio contact and when we started off down some track in the forest you basically had to choose which guide to stay with as the party would spread out over 60-70 metres. FOMO fears (fear of missing out) ran strong, and when the back guide called "Pied Goshawk" over the radio, pandemonium would break out with people running at full speed back down the track. Invariably you missed something somewhere as we only 3-4 hours in any one place- never enough time to guarantee a sighting of everything and even less to get a good photo. Despite that most people managed to see most of the endemics on each stop.



Grey Ternlet

disadvantage with a 400mm lens which really did not cut it with birds 100 metres away. Some guys were using the new 400mm DO lens with a 2x converter and others had the new 500mm with a 1.4 converter. ID would always have been difficult without some photo support which was still difficult when you were trying to ID a supposed Beck's Petrel at 300 metres. None the less some great shots were taken by those who displayed their shots on the photo show on the TV screens each day.

The land birding was generally much of a muchness (except for New Caledonia and the Kagu of course). There were basically a dozen different families- Monarchs, Whistlers, White-eyes, Flycatchers, Parrots and Parakeets, Fruit doves and Imperial Pigeons, Starlings, Honeyeaters and Myzomelas just about sums it up and you could pick and mix your species in virtually identical habitats on all these small tropical islands.

Most people found the sea birding much more interesting with some of the rarest seabirds in the world on offer.

We departed Tauranga at 5.00pm too late to do any serious birding- but looking forward to an interesting day way out in the Hauraki Gulf in the morning. Dawn would break just after six most mornings of the trip and the hour before breakfast at 7.30 or 8.00 usually rewarded the early riser. Our first day at sea was no exception with at first distant views of Grey Ternlets (Noddies) but with patience and a little good fortune as we approached a bait ball full of gulls and Buller's Shearwaters we had closer views.

Before we left the Gulf we had our first chumming session which brought in 3 species of Storm Petrels – New Zealand, White-faced and Wilson's. I was still finding my feet on the boat and watched from deck 5 – not the best place on the boat but I still managed some distant shots- not nearly as good as I got on our first pelagic in the Haukari Gulf. Two new birds for me however quickly came along- a solitary Pycrofts among the Cook's Petrels and our first Black-winged Petrel- the first of many over the coming days.

Day 3 off the three Kings Islands brought lots of birds including 3 species of Albatross- a couple of Gibson's, half a dozen White-capped and a solitary Northern Royal- seriously out of range. Our first Wedge-tailed Shearwaters- the most common bird on the trip with records everyday while at sea. Lots of Black Petrels, Fluttering and Buller's Shearwaters, a couple of Kermadecs, a Long-tailed



Black Petrel

The one big problem for everyone was the fact that the birds rarely came close to the boat. It was better in the cold waters of NZ and Australia where activity was greater but in the warm tropics where numbers are much lower you might only have 3 or less photo opportunities in 8 hours of sea-birding. So you really had to put the hours in to make sure of a reasonable photo of most birds. Chumming was a hit and miss affair working better in the colder waters of NZ and Japan and being a total failure in the warmer tropical seas. I was at a distinct

Jaeger and our first White Tern a lot further south than normal. We had first our distant Collared Petrel and even the dark-bellied sub species known as Magnificent Petrel both well beyond the range of my 400mm along with our first Gould's and White-necked Petrels. Then a contentious bird- to me it was nothing more than a speck in the distance but our guides managed somehow to convince themselves that this was a Fiji Petrel- another way out of range bird.



Australian Gannet

Day 4 saw us moving from the colder NZ waters into warmer climes and activity slowed as we approached Norfolk Island. We had our first Masked Boobies- the "Tasman" sub-species with the dark eye, more White Terns and a White-tailed Tropicbird – a rare bird in Oz waters plus our first Tahiti Petrels. We anchored at Sydney Bay on the South coast of Norfolk and the zodiacs had everyone quickly ashore- a dry landing on a small wharf where the busses were waiting to pick us up. Norfolk has only 4 endemics- a Parakeet, Robin, Gerygone and White-eye all of which can be found in a stretch of forest just 100 metres long. The White-eye was the trickiest as there were lots of Silvereyes as well so you had to check each White-eye carefully. Norfolk reminded a bit of the Isle of Wight- beautifully clean and tidy with neat houses, shops and pastures with sheep and cattle. After a morning ashore we said farewell to the Border force officials – who do you have to fall foul of to get a posting to Norfolk I wonder? and were on the boat in time for lunch.

It was now just a day's sailing to New Caledonia and our appointment with a Kagu, but we had time to watch more Gould's and our first Providence Petrels. We landed at first light at Numea the capital of NC, ready for the 60 kilometre drive to Parc Riviere Bleu. Here we met with the warden who did nothing more than bang his shovel on the ground and dig through the leaf litter for 4 Kagu to appear and start scratching for grubs. I wish all lifers were so easy! There are 19 endemics on NC and I saw 13 of them over the 6 hours. The heavens opened and it poured with rain making things difficult but even star attractions like the Crow Honeyeater were seen by most people. A soggy lunch was had in the park but even the bus breaking down on the way back did not dampen the spirits of most after a good days birding.

This was the only island on the trip where we overnighted and birded again the next morning. I



Kagu

decided I was not too interested in a NC Thicketbird (a real skulker glimpsed by a few) and spent some time in town with Stephanie. Numea is a first world town – lots of good roads and new cars and an interesting fish market and harbour area.

Leaving New Caledonia followed by Black Noddies and White Terns we now faced several days at sea en route for the Solomons



Blythe's Hornbill

Five landings in the Solomon's were planned. However our scheduled stop on Rennel could not take place as a cargo freighter had run aground on the reef and polluted the harbour with oil causing a major environmental problem. Instead we headed for Santa Ana a tiny Island off the coast of Makira. Six endemics were available but the Solomons Sea-eagle and White-headed Fruit dove would to wait for our next stop at Makira. Silver-capped Fruit Dove and White-collared Monarch were both very attractive additions to the list.

Having birded Makira the following morning we visited the small village of Anuta where Heritage Expeditions support the local school. We had a wonderful welcoming ceremony with lots of fresh coconut drinks and floral garlands made by the local kids.

Next stop was Guadalcanal where we anchored at Honiara, capital of the Solomons where we birded Mount Austin. A distant view of Pied Goshawk was an attractive addition to the list as was Buff-headed Coucal- otherwise it was a different mix of Monarchs, Cuckoo-shrikes, Flowerpeckers and Fantails with Solomon's Cockatoo and Cardinal Lory adding to the excitement.

Next up was Tetepare, the largest uninhabited Island in the South Pacific. There is a research station on the island and the local rangers were ready to show us around. Many locals had paddled for hours on the news of our visit to sell us some of their locally carved bowls, war canoes, carved fish, birds and even Manta Rays. We were spoiled for choice tempted by some of the finest quality hand carving I have ever seen. The birding was not bad either with Solomon's Sea eagle flying overhead and Melanesian Megapodes calling from the undergrowth. A Beach Thick-knee was spotted but unfortunately not by me despite a couple of hours dedicated searching in the afternoon. It would have been our last Thick-knee required!!

Overnight we sailed on to Kolombangara- our last stop in the Solomons. We bussed up to the top of the mountain where Pale Mountain Pigeons and Blythe's Hornbills put on a show. Down the road a Roviana Rail stopped for a brief second before diving into the undergrowth (seen by a lucky few including me). Meek's and Duchess Lorikeets were seen by all along with Kolombangara Monarch.

So we left the Solomons behind sailing along the coast of Bougainville where some distant Heinroth's Shearwaters appeared. The only one close enough to photograph I unfortunately missed. Sea temperatures were in the upper twenties and very little was around. We continued on up the coast of New Ireland moving into the territory of Beck's Petrel. Attempts at chumming produced no results but a number of Beck's were finally spotted, all a good way off the ship. So with only some Red-footed Boobies for company we headed on towards the equator and the 'Dead zone' of the tropics.



White-collared Monarch



Matsudaira's Storm Petrel

Overnight we ran into a violent tropical storm and crossed the equator (all ceremonies cancelled) in seas more reminiscent of the Southern oceans. We faced another long and unproductive day at sea in the wake of the storm, but finally on our fifth day at sea we approached Weno Island in the Carolines. We entered Chuuk Harbour after lunch and spent the afternoon exploring one of the most third world filthy little towns I have ever encountered. The following morning we were up early to chase the 8 endemics to be found on the main Island. This proved to be not too difficult and by mid-morning all were in the bag. The two

doves – Purple-capped Fruit and White-fronted Ground were the two most attractive species to see.

None of us was sorry to leave Chuuk behind despite the fact that we now had another five days at sea before reaching Japan's most southerly Bonin Islands. The most interesting bird found in these still relatively warm waters was Matsudaira's Storm Petrels which were around the boat for a couple of days and came in to an oil drip once the crew's fishing lines had been hauled back on board. As we moved into cooler waters, more birds appeared- we now had three species of booby around the ship, Brown, Masked and Red-footed, Bonin Petrels appeared in their hundreds. The Wedge-tailed Shearwaters increased in numbers and our first Bannerman's Shearwaters appeared. Much debate occurred about the Shearwaters seen- Bannerman's, or Bryan's or even possibly a Newall's or another Tropical. There is still much to be learned about these black and white tropical ocean shearwaters.

We headed on to the Bonin Islands and cleared immigration & customs at Chichi-jima. The plan was now to sail to Haha-jima and land there to find Bonin's Honeyeater. The Japanese banned the use of the zodiacs in a "nature conservation" area so we had lined up some fishing boats to get ashore but the swells were heavy and after waiting for some time we reluctantly abandoned the idea of getting ashore.

In the afternoon as headed northwards towards Torishima conditions improved and several Black-footed Albatross approached. Someone even claimed a Laysan's although I never heard it called. The bird of the day however turned out to be Tristrans Storm Petrel. We encountered two large flocks of hundreds if not thousands of birds sitting like midges on the water way up in front of us. They always flew as we approached but allowed some fairly distant photos.



Black-footed Albatross

Torishima is a small uninhabited island where the Short-tailed Albatross breeds. We arrived just after dawn and did a couple of circuits of the island. There were several juveniles around but we were not allowed to chum

within a 3 kilometre limit, so we retreated our carefully measured 3 kilometres, began to chum- lots of carefully chopped pieces of fish- and slowly the birds began to arrive. First the Wedgies then the Black-footed and then the Short-tailed. We had a wonderful hour with these birds- the Short-tailed came in every plumage possible and the seas behind the boat were alive with birds. I will let the photos speak for themselves, but soon it was time to turn and head for Miyake-jima and our final landing of the trip. The afternoon saw the Wedgies our companions for so long- slowly replaced by Streaked Shearwaters. The seas were choppy through the night and the wind was brisk as dawn broke on Miyake-jima. The Japanese overnight had revoked permission to use the zodiacs and with choppy seas and a worsening forecast it was again deemed too dangerous and too time-consuming to use a couple of small fishing vessels.

So a disappointing end to our travels through the Izu islands- but there were still seabirds to see. There were some sea stacks close by where Japanese Murrelets were known to breed and we were to have some crippling views of a dozen or so birds which only dived when the boat was about to run them down. In the afternoon a final chum brought in lots of Streaked Shearwaters which otherwise never approached as closely as the Wedgies. We had one more night at sea and 5500 miles after departing Tauranga we docked at the modern port of Yokohama. After 12 consecutive days at sea it would take a while to find our land legs again.

All that was left was to say farewell to newly made friends and the good old expedition crew and board our busses for the airport. After two months of travelling we had just one stop left. A couple of days in Hongkong to break the long journey home.



Short-tailed Albatross