

MONTERAY BAY PELAGIC – Sun 10 Sep 06

WO1 (Supvr R) Mark Easterbrook

All photographs © Mike Lockyear of Crediton, Devon.

Many thanks to Mike and Julie Lockyear for allowing me access to his photographs, without whose cooperation this article would not have been so in depth.

As part of a Birdseekers tour of Central California (3-13 Sept 06), the 10th Sept was allotted to a Pelagic in Monterey Bay. Internationally renowned as one of the most potentially rewarding areas to take to the sea, the trip did not disappoint.

It is worthy of note that only my observations are noted and does not truly reflect the amount of seabirds present which are accurately recorded on the Shearwater Journeys website: <http://www.shearwaterjourneys.com/ag060910.htm>

An early morning start at 0500 hours saw us board the boat at 0530 hours, where we were greeted by Debbie Shearwater of Shearwater Journeys (a real bonus), amidst waterproofs, woolly headgear and a raft of sea sickness pills. Some birders preferred to be macho with regard to taking the precaution of sea sickness pills and as predicted paid the price later, with some indeed wasting twelve hours of their life and some hard earned cash to boot. Hardy veterans of the Scillolian 3, Pride of Bilbao and AOS Tofino Pelagic, (Canada) continued to eat their way through “monster” American French sticks purchased in a nearby Safeway the night before – to the horror of those participants providing their very own unique blend of “chum” for the eagerly awaiting Gulls following in the wake of the vessel, one of which was juvenile Heerman’s.

The plan was to sail approximately forty miles off shore into an area of sea canyons varying in depth between five hundred and one thousand meters. The varying depths attract a variety of species of seabirds roosting above them, obviously feeding on the different food sources produced by the varying sea temperatures. Shearwater Journeys employed four or five “spotters”, who were extremely good birders in their own right as well as Debbie on the bridge, there was little chance of very much slipping through the net.

We had only been sailing for about forty five minutes when the shout went up, a Manx Shearwater, although not of great interest for a British birder, it was the rarest species seen during the trip, closely followed by a Black-footed Albatross in the wake and several diving Rhinoceros Auklets which were seen sporadically in singles throughout the day – A fine start to the day.

A little later a Least Storm Petrel was seen with its distinctive jizz and deep wing beats as opposed to the erratic and fast wing beats of the Ashy Storm Petrels which were in the majority. We began to see our first Buller’s Shearwaters (a beautiful bird), as a pod of Risso’s Dolphins appeared at the bow and a Pacific Sunfish sailed by and an assortment of birds gathered around a Humboldt’s Squid.

As the trip progressed, Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters became the default seabirds with a constant stream of Western Gulls following the vessel. Twelve Sabine’s Gulls were noted (adults) and Black-footed Albatrosses made occasional visits to the wake of the boat, whilst the small rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes went largely unnoticed with a Northern Right Whale Dolphin having much attention paid to it as it indulged in some bow-riding.

Shortly after followed an extremely loud shout of Skua!!!! We had already noted many Pomerine Skuas, showing “maximum spoonage” – as described by the American spotters, however the sight of a South Polar Skua with its light brown nape provided the trip with a much sought after bird, four or five of which were seen in total. A passerine decided to hitch a lift on the boat which turned out to be an exhausted juvenile Chipping Sparrow and stayed aboard until journeys end.

Huge numbers of Buller’s Shearwaters were now being seen and this is a very unusual event. Interspersed with these were several Flesh-footed Shearwaters – a real bonus and much unexpected bird to see. Our journey to the Storm Petrel roosting grounds was interrupted when a pod of Orcas were spotted. The adult male had a very distinctive “flop-dorso fin”, which is very unusual and ID photos were taken as it could easily be traced.

Following our diversion we arrived at the Storm Petrel’s roosting cavern. The Petrels apparently choose a different underwater cavity to roost over each year and this is not always found – another stroke of luck. As we approached, thousands of Petrels could be seen resting on the sea. However they are very skittish, are not attracted by chum and tend to disperse very quickly. As the birds began to fly, the size differential and jizz could clearly be noted between the more common smaller Ashy Storm Petrels and the bigger Black Storm Petrels. The sheer number of birds present in these rafts was astonishing.

We continued on our journey towards Monterey Harbour when another sighting caused many cameras to be pointed in the general direction of two breaching and tail slapping Humpback Whales, another highlight for many. Shortly after, a Great White Shark was noted that appeared very sinister as it disappeared under the boat never to be seen again and a Northern Fur Seal.

As we approached Monterey harbour numerous Brown Pelicans, Brandt’s Cormorant and Heerman’s Gulls were noted. Added to this Black Turnstones, two Pigeon Guillemots, and an unusual female Harlequin Duck this far south added to an already exceptional days birding. The California Sea Lions on the harbour wall, made quite a stink – I mean sight.

SUMMARY

Fantastic! Aside from the species seen, the sheer number of Shearwaters, Albatrosses and Petrels with their close proximity to the boat, make this Pelagic a must for any Seabird enthusiast. This coupled with the cetaceans noted made this trip truly unforgettable although it was noted by Debbie Shearwater that we had been very lucky and it was an exceptional day. To anyone visiting the area I recommend a pelagic day out as money well spent! For AOS members wishing to undertake a trip to Monterey they do a 3 day event which I’m prepared to sort out!

Birdseekers Web page quote: <http://www.birdseekers.co.uk>

One of the most exciting day’s birding imaginable must surely be a Monterey Bay pelagic, and our trip with Shearwater Journeys proved no exception. Imagine raft upon raft of Buller’s Shearwaters (1543 in all!), majestic Black-footed Albatrosses circling the boat, Flesh-footed Shearwater, 3 species of Storm Petrel, Harlequin Duck, South Polar Skua, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, very close Killer Whales, breaching Humpback Whales, bow-riding Northern Right Whale Dolphin and a Great White Shark.