

NAVAL PARTY AOS 2010 PELAGIC - PORTSMOUTH TO BILBAO - 16-19 SEPTEMBER

Andy Harrison

Soldiers should never go to sea. That was certainly the general conclusion at the end of the 2008 pelagic after an "interesting time" in the Bay of Biscay. So why, two years later, were a party of six stood once again on the deck of the P&O ferry *Pride of Bilbao* steaming out of Portsmouth destined for Bilbao by way of the Bay of Biscay?

Good question. There are, of course, numerous answers but the two key elements driving the decision to set sail again were the dulling of memory over time (it couldn't have been that bad last time) and the fact that the P&O Portsmouth to Bilbao service provided by the *Pride of Bilbao* was due to finish at the end of September. Oh, of course, there was the remote chance of seeing a few birds and cetaceans that landlubbers don't normally see!

So, on the evening of Thursday 16 September, the cast assembled at the P&O ferry terminal at Portsmouth for the latest adventure: Roger Dickey ("captain" and Chairman), Andrew Bray ("officer of the watch" and "retiring" Honorary Secretary), Richard Sergeant ("first mate" and new Honorary Secretary), Bob Hayward ("principal weapons officer"), Andy Harrison ("chief stoker") and Richard Horton (welcome civvy guest).

By the time the party had been processed, boarded, found cabins and sorted themselves out it was dark and too late for any deck time. Consequently, the company sought out the galley and after some scran retired to a quiet corner of the barracks for tales of past sea faring and birding adventures over a glass or two of grog.

Reveille was called at 0500 hours on Friday 17 September but, thankfully, the drummer was not present. The party was fully assembled out on the top deck (starboard side) before full light, ready to repel boarders. Portsmouth to Bilbao. Bay of Biscay. Bound to be a rough crossing; it always is. Not this time! After a chill start the day proved warm and dry and the sea state was calm. Naval Party AOS stood too from 0600 hours to 1910 hours by which time you couldn't see anything by dint of the fact that it was dark. So, who failed to indent for night vision equipment so that the vigil could be continued throughout the night?

Perversely, the good weather that made the voyage so gentle on the senses, meant that the bird life was limited. Gannets and Great Skuas were regularly sighted but Shearwaters and Petrels were in short supply. During the quieter periods hardened bird watchers resorted to searching for and watching cetaceans! There were, of course, examples of pelagic rarities such as Tree Pipit, Willow Warbler and Whitethroat. There is nothing quite like watching a small passerine crossing the open sea, miles from any land, to ram home the realities of migration.

Friday evening was another night of revelry in the galley and mess deck. Oh, ok, food, beer, conversation and bed!

The party had a bit of a lie in on Saturday 18 September but were all ready to catch the liberty ship at 0700 for the run ashore in Bilbao. As with the previous trip the plan involved taking a taxi to the top (as near as you can get in a taxi) of the local hill to re-acquaint all with "terrestrial" birds. After a good time around the top, the party made a leisurely walking descent down the hill back to the ferry port in time to re-embark for the 1215 sailing. Over 33 species were seen during the run ashore and, as ever, the highlights will vary according to individual but must include Sardinian Warbler, Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike and, for the author, Black Redstart.¹

Once back on board the party returned to the top deck (port side) to be greeted by the sight of a flock of 40+ Spoonbills flying west. The stag ended in the middle of Last Dog Watch (1900) the day having remained dry and bright and, despite the wind, the sea state was again calm (pew!).

¹ Despite being told that they are common in London, the author has never seen one in the UK.

Sightings of sea birds were infrequent so watching cetaceans was, again, the order of the day; not that many are admitting to it!

The final day, Sunday 19 September, saw the party all on deck by 0645, despite another lie in, and remained at its station until disembarkation at Portsmouth at 1715. The party did however move down a deck to take advantage of the protection from the wind afforded by the superstructure! Very few new species were seen on the return passage but two Puffins were spotted and a Peregrine Falcon was observed on and around one of the old forts protecting Portsmouth harbour.

Having safely disembarked, complete with stomach contents, the party dispersed and headed for home locations. Whilst the total number of species seen during the trip was a respectable 77 for several of the party this included a significant number of "lifers" (four for the author and 12 for Richard H).

Soldiers should never go to sea. Why is it then that the AOS membership is discussing alternate options for pelagic trips in 2011 and beyond now that the *Pride of Bilbao* service has ended?!

Avast!

Species Lists

Pelagic

British (English) Name	Scientific Name
Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>
Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>
Great Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>
Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>

Cetaceans and Testudines

Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
Bottle Nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
Leatherback Turtle	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>
Long Finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>

Bilbao

British (English) Name

British (English) Name	Scientific Name
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>

Bilbao Harbour**British (English) Name**

Great White Egret

Grey Heron

White Stork

Spoonbill

Little Stint

Turnstone

Black-headed Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Herring Gull

Yellow-legged Gull

Scientific Name*Ardea alba**Ardea cinerea**Ciconia ciconia**Platalea leucorodia**Calidris minuta**Arenaria interpres**Chroicocephalus ridibundus**Larus fuscus**Larus argentatus**Larus michahellis***Portsmouth Channel****British (English) Name**

Mute Swan

Little Egret

Peregrine

Kittiwake

Black-headed Gull

Herring Gull

Woodpigeon

Jackdaw

Carrion Crow

Scientific Name*Cygnus olor**Egretta garzetta**Falco peregrinus**Rissa tridactyla**Chroicocephalus ridibundus**Larus argentatus**Columba palumbus**Corvus monedula**Corvus corone*