



# ***Fylde Bird Club*** ***Lancashire***

## **CLUB NEWSLETTER JUNE 2008**

Welcome to the club newsletter for the spring period. Unfortunately there has been a delay of a month in issuing this newsletter due the various holidays of the Editor, the Secretary and the Sightings Editor. I apologise for this and will ensure that the August edition is available in a timely fashion.

The Spring has been excellent, with in particular Ross's Gull and Bonaparte's Gull being very notable though unfortunately since the recent sightings were compiled the sad news of the former's demise came through. There has also been plenty of opportunity to undertake fieldwork for the National Atlas and I know many of you have been contributing records to this.

In this edition of the newsletter we have the second part of Barry Dyson's excellent article on his South Atlantic Odyssey. I have also included a short note on a week I spent on La Palma in the Canary Islands.

Following the completion of publication of Barry's article any new material would be welcome. If anybody would like to undertake a review of the new county avifauna I am sure other members would be very interested in that. Essentially though any information you have on birds or birding you would like to share with fellow club members would be very welcome.

Good birding,

Stephen.



## South Atlantic Odyssey (Part 2 of 2)

The 18/3 saw damp and drizzly conditions with the air temperature rising to 6<sup>o</sup>C. Today we saw our first sighting of the Tristan (Wandering) Albatross and one lucky individual saw the only White-headed Petrel of the odyssey. 3 Sooty Albatrosses together was a taster of things to come and other new birds included a Great-winged Petrel, a Spectacled Petrel, recently split from White-chinned Petrel and 10 Little Shearwaters of the southern race *Puffinus assimilis elegans*. My highlight of the day was seeing a Soft-plumaged Petrel chasing a Kerguelen Petrel with 2 Sooty Albatrosses to one side while in the foreground a Great Shearwater was chasing a Little Shearwater. Another unforgettable moment.

Grey Petrels increased to 50 and Sooty Shearwaters reached their trip peak with 30 sightings. Cetaceans were largely absent today but a pod of 4 whales close to the ship sparked a lot of interest. However with very brief views, and no pictures, ID remained inconclusive with the general consensus favouring Southern Bottlenose Whale, although some markings indicated another beaked whale, the very rare Shepard's Beaked Whale.

The following day 19/3 saw our position at 08.00: 44<sup>o</sup>14'S / 16<sup>o</sup>55'W, 381 nautical miles from Gough Island. With the wind force only 2-3, and the temperature up to 9<sup>o</sup>C it was a pleasant day on deck, and with new species continuing to appear, interest remained high. Among sightings of Sooty, Wandering and Black-browed came an albatross only seen twice, the Shy Albatross with its characteristic black 'thumb marks' on the white underwing at the join of the body. Today also saw my first Atlantic Petrels with about 30 being seen. Six of the tiny Grey-backed Storm Petrels were also seen today with 3 others being seen on separate dates. They did not stay with the ship and sadly I didn't get a photo but they were cracking little birds. 5 equally attractive petrels, the White-faced Storm Petrel were also seen but not photographed. Our first Broad-billed Prions appeared today, confirmed once again by digital photography by examining the wide, duck-like black bill that can only be seen well from frontal views.

Marine life was once again thin on the water, with only a probable Sei Whale close to the ship in the morning and a few 'blows' from distant whales. A couple of Sub-antarctic Fur Seals was one of the first signs that we must be closing in on land.

The 20/3 saw temperatures continue to rise peaking at 14<sup>o</sup>C. With a light wind, good visibility, scattered showers and sunshine our winter plumage was shed in favour of T-shirts as everybody enjoyed the warmer weather. Today we were finally to reach Gough Island after a distance of 1,377 nautical miles (1,584 land miles) from Prion Island. It had taken us 118 hours at an average speed of 11.66 knots per hour. It had been interesting poring over the nautical charts on the bridge each day, from where we could also e-mail back home the events of the day. Now we could see land again as the first 'land ahoy' call was made at a distance of 44 nautical miles away.

Another call was made by one of our keen cetacean watchers who homed in on two distant splashes claiming a Great White Shark through his image stabilising binoculars. The only known 'flying' shark is the Great White, common enough around South Africa and not that far away, so who knows. It went in the log as such.

It took well over 4 hours before we reached Gough Island seeing more and more birds as we drew closer. Sooty Albatross numbers increased, with up to 200 being seen and I was in ecstasy with over 100 Kerguelen Petrels to drool over. Soft-plumaged Petrels are no slouches in the speed stakes and with over 500 seen today our heads and bodies were constantly on the move. Atlantic Petrels peaked at 500, not too surprising as they are endemic to this island and the Tristan da Cunha group. With over 3,000 Broad-billed Prions, 2,000 Great Shearwaters, 55 Little Shearwaters, 50 Tristan Skuas, 400 Grey Petrels, 200 Southern Giant Petrels and our first Yellow-nosed Albatrosses it's fair to say this was some day. With smaller numbers of many other



species including 5 albatrosses, 3 petrels and 3 storm petrels our heads were spinning with delight. I particularly enjoyed watching the White-bellied Storm Petrels foot paddling and literally bouncing off the waters surface.

Gough Island is 65 square kms in size, rises to 910m and has cliffs up to a height of 460m in places. It is 425 km from Tristan da Cunha and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. Many species breed here and few scientists have visited the island long enough to obtain accurate censuses, but an amazing overall figure of 20 million pairs of birds has been suggested.

It was not yet dark so it was decided to pay a visit to the Northern Rockhopper Penguins we could see below the cliffs, looking for the endemic Gough Moorhen and Gough Island Bunting at the same time. Landings are not allowed on the island but there is a manned South African weather station on top of the cliffs. Our zodiac drivers skilfully found a way through the kelp fringe surrounding the island and we duly ticked off the flightless moorhen and the walking bunting. 100's of Sub-antarctic Fur Seals were also seen looking very different to their Antarctic cousins with their golden face and chest. The aptly named Rockhoppers with their long yellow floppy eyebrow plumes were a joy to watch as they hopped their way, feet together over the rocky coastline. It was time to call it a day and what a day it had been. Not quite over a Soft-plumaged Petrel was found on deck after dinner and eagerly photographed before being released.

The following morning we were woken up at 04.50 for an early morning zodiac cruise along the coast of this truly magical island. It was a perfect morning with calm seas and few clouds. The island oozed mystery, recalling Conan Doyle's 'Lost World' or Spielberg's 'Jurassic Park'. It was a geologists dream and a birders delight. Numerous waterfalls cascaded over cliff edges. Extraordinary rock formations and a rainbow of colours bedazzled our senses. Ferns, tree ferns, sedges, mosses and *Phyllica* a shrubby tree grew amongst the lush vegetation dominated by tussock grass and all the while Sooty and Yellow-nosed Albatrosses wheeled above us. Southern Elephant and Sub-antarctic Fur Seals were seen at very close quarters with the fur seals frequently brushing alongside our zodiacs as we came as close to shore as we were allowed. We meandered around stacks, islets and caves all home to nesting birds and grazing crabs. A visit was made to a rocky outcrop where a colony of Antarctic Terns with young were present. You could say that this is where the Antarctic meets the tropics as 4 Common Noddies were also seen.

Up to 7 Gough Moorhens and 20 Gough Buntings were seen plus prolonged views of the comical Northern Rockhopper penguins during our 2 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hour early morning cruise. You could not have wished for a better start to the day but with stomachs rumbling, breakfast called and we made our way back to the ship. During breakfast the ship lifted anchor and headed north while some of the crew did some fishing to enable a spot of *chumming* to be carried out with a mixture of fish entrails and kitchen scraps.

As we left Gough Island behind, an onion bag full of 'chum' was dragged along behind the ship, soon attracting a large gathering of tubenoses. This was photography made easy with scores of Tristan Wandering Albatrosses, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Sooty Albatrosses, Great Shearwaters, Southern Giant Petrels, Spectacled Petrels, White-chinned Petrels, and White-bellied Storm Petrels following and alongside the ship. The net lasted for a while then after half an hour or so began to burst open allowing a free for all feeding frenzy to ensue. What a spectacle as we steamed NNW towards Tristan da Cunha reluctantly leaving Gough behind us. A group of about 20 Southern Right Whale Dolphins apparently common enough but rarely seen were claimed at some distance from the ship.

In the early morning of the 22/3 we arrived at the remotest inhabited place on earth, Tristan Da Cunha. It is roughly situated 1,500 miles west of Cape Town, 2,000 miles east of Buenos Aires, and 1,350 miles south of St Helena which is the nearest inhabited place. The huge volcanic cone of Tristan (6,760 feet high) was free of cloud and the ship was idling along after a calm night. What a sight as we made our way round to the only flat part of the island, a basalt plateau with the settlement of Edinburgh. Formalities completed we were given permission to land and at 09.00 we touched down on Tristan soil.



We had until 17.00 to explore the island. My first port of call was to the lava flow and volcanic cone that had caused the island to be evacuated in 1961. From there I made my way to the 'famous' potato patches or allotments as we would know them. Cattle and sheep were in the fields along the way and several Southern Painted Lady butterflies were seen, along with other insects and wildflowers such as daisies and hawkweeds. It was good to be able to finally stretch one's legs on a decent walk and to talk to the 'locals' who were very friendly and helpful. The last of the potato harvest was being taken in, and as I chatted to one of the residents an Antarctic Tern took advantage by taking worms and other invertebrates from the disturbed soil. With no competition from passerines it was a niche open for them to exploit.

The only other species I saw all day were Yellow-nosed and Sooty Albatrosses high above the foothills of the volcano. A rodent eradication programme is badly needed if they are to see the return of the Tristan Thrush and Bunting and more nesting seabirds. I ambled back to Edinburgh and visited the small museum, the Post Office, the supermarket, various craft sellers and the bar where several South African beers were consumed while 'Coronation Street' was being shown on TV.

It was a relaxing day in pleasant temperatures and sunny skies as I continued to walk round the attractive settlement, stopping to watch the school children playing football and admiring the neat and tidy dwellings some still with corrugated roofs, although since the 2001 hurricane most have been fitted with galvanised replacements. However with a fragile population of around 270 and slowly decreasing I fear for their future as all the young folk seemed eager to leave. No doubt the 'Internet' has shown them what they are missing and they are keen to broaden their horizons. Indeed two of the young folk were travelling with us to Ascension Island bound for the Falklands where they had short term job offers as welders after earning the relevant certificates back in the UK in Birmingham.

Overnight we kept our anchorage outside Edinburgh but by early morning the conditions in the harbour were impossible so we were unable to pick up any local guides for our visit to Nightingale Island. However the islanders on Nightingale reported good conditions in one of only two landing sites there, and along with our two Tristanian's Leon and Frankie on board, it was thought we would be able to land without extra personnel from Edinburgh. Wrong. The swells prevented us landing all day and we were forced to spend time cruising slowly around the inshore areas. We anchored on the lee side of the island in the hope that the swell might abate but it wasn't to be.

At least it was a sunny day with temperatures rising to 20<sup>o</sup>C and uncountable numbers of Great Shearwaters to count, ending up as a tick in the log. 350 Great-winged Petrels were seen by the end of the day and our cruising also gave us good views of more Spectacled Petrels as well as over 200 White-bellied Storm Petrels. Although it was frustrating not to have landed on Nightingale there was still the next day for a second chance. In the evening our disappointment was tempered by a fine BBQ on the aft deck. Good food and beverages flowed as the music played in the warm Tristan evening.

The next morning 24/3 was a relief to all, as the conditions at Edinburgh had improved so much that the local guides could come aboard. We headed to Inaccessible Island and on arriving Rinie and the Tristanians took a scout zodiac to check out the conditions on the beach. The go ahead was given and a tricky landing followed with some people getting quite wet. It was worth it though as we were soon investigated by several curious tail-cocking Tristan Thrushes with their gold and black patterned underparts. Fearless they approached without caution inspecting us and our gear just as the King Penguins had done. Within minutes several Tristan Buntings also showed themselves in the tussock grass but the real prize was yet to come. Tim happy to be taking advantage of terra firma had brought a disc player ashore and played the squeaky calls of one of the ultimate ticks: the Inaccessible Island Flightless Rail, only to be found on this one small island. Although we could hear them responding we could not see them. We repositioned ourselves further along the pebbly beach soon to be rewarded with cries of 'There's one there'. They are the smallest flightless birds in the world, dark brown all over with red eyes, and a short decurved bill. They were



rather like miniature Kiwis, with similar strange fur like feathers. Incredibly fast in the dense tussock they also proved difficult to photograph and I managed just a fuzzy image. With all three endemics seen, including 3 rails we made our way back quickly to the ship in order to attempt another landing at Nightingale Island. Incidentally this island is also the only known breeding place of the Spectacled Petrel, with an encouraging increase to about 20,000 birds at the last census.

Evacuation off the beach went without incident but the gangway on the ship was a different matter, proving very difficult on our return with one lady having to be hoisted on board by the ships crane whilst still in the zodiac. Another lady missed her footing and slipped into the water but was immediately rescued by the crew. In just over an hour we arrived at Nightingale Island and landed safely on the rocks below the steep path that would take us to where the Grosbeak Bunting another endemic might be seen. Only one lucky observer saw the bunting but the visit was immensely enjoyable with many more Tristan Thrushes and Tristan Buntings being seen.

Best of all was close encounters with fledgling Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, a real privilege and memories to treasure as we trespassed over their breeding grounds with their immaculate bowl shaped nests, small compared to those of the Wandering Albatross. Much wing exercising and bill clapping was going on, although they seemed unperturbed by our presence. Here too were numerous shearwater and petrel burrows and one of the Tristanian wardens retrieved for us one of the fluffiest of chicks you are ever likely to see, that of a Great Shearwater. Adult Great Shearwaters were walking ungainly down the hacked out path looking for some where to take off from, while others arrived with a thump on the ground. More decent views of Northern Rockhopper penguins brought to an end another brilliant day.

Just for the record Nightingale Island is approximately 1 square mile in size and is home to 250 pairs of Sooty albatrosses, 5,000 pairs of Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, 10,000 pairs of Broad-billed Prions , 10,000 pairs of White-faced Storm Petrels, 125,000 pairs of Northern Rockhopper Penguins, and 3,000,000 pairs of Great Shearwaters with smaller numbers of Common Noddies and Antarctic Terns.

Reaching Tristan shortly before dark we bid farewell to our guides and were soon heading off northwards on the next long leg of our journey (1,327 nm) to St Helena. As expected the next day saw sea-bird sightings beginning to tail off and one Tristan Albatross and one Sooty Albatross set the pattern for a quiet passage. Soft-plumaged Petrel numbers slumped to 5 and White-bellied Storm Petrels were down to 20 from the previous day's total of 200. At least a few goggled-eyed Spectacled Petrels stayed with the ship and a new species was Leach's Storm Petrel with up to 11 recorded. Tonight, those who were interested watched the first of four episodes of a French television drama called *Napoleon* as a taster to our visit to St Helena where he was exiled for a second time following his escape from Elba.

The next day 26/3 saw even fewer numbers of sea-birds with only 3 species seen today. The albatrosses had left us and we were down to 4 Spectacled Petrels and 1 White-bellied Storm Petrel, the last day we were to see either species. New for the Odyssey were 3 Bulwer's Petrels, this stunningly shaped species a sight for tired eyes as we searched the ocean for signs of life. With their long pointed wings and long narrowing tail this all dark species save for a faint diagonal wing bar is a gem to see. Staying close to the ocean surface searching for prey its flight is unpredictable as it twists its body and zig-zags its way along. What a bird this would be to see in British waters, instead of having to travel to the Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic islands.

Frustratingly, a distant large pod of dolphins (50-100) remained unidentified. Even from digital images opinions differed between Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphins and Clymene Dolphins although both species may have been present. Much easier to be sure of was the appearance of hundreds of flying-fish leaping out of the water to escape the ship, with one landing on board hitting our chef on the leg. I saw a school of 60 or so together as they flew low over the water travelling some considerable distance. Clearly sea temperatures were rising, with the air temperature reaching 23<sup>o</sup> C today.



At 08.00 on March 27 we were still 635 nm from St Helena but the days now were pleasant on deck. Today saw the nadir of sightings with just two species all day. Bulwer's Petrels increased to 7, and we saw 2 early morning sightings of Red-billed Tropicbirds, probably at the edge of their South Atlantic range. It was a day for inside lectures, a feature of every day and with a dearth of sightings better attended. The morning's talk was entitled 'St Helena- The Lost world' but in the afternoon the talk was replaced by a surprise party as Lillian and Jason had prepared a great ice cream buffet including a couple of buckets (!) of Campari/orange juice and Pina Colada respectively. Walter the ship's doctor once again played his accordion to add to the tropical atmosphere on deck and a good time was had by all. In the evening the third episode of *Napoleon* was screened.

The next day saw us closing in on St Helena with bird numbers increasing. Bulwer's Petrels peaked at 20 offering lingering views of some, as they kept pace with the ship. Bloody marvellous. Leach's Petrels came close and afforded comparison with one of their close congeners - Madeiran petrel with 10 and 3 seen respectively. These however were nothing like the Leach's we see from the Fylde coast in Sept/Oct and you could be forgiven for mistaking them. Their upperparts were bleached out making them extraordinarily pale and buff coloured in appearance, particularly within the crescentic wing bar. Some distant petrels were logged as Storm petrel sp but a single Red-billed Tropicbird and a Brown Noddy posed no such problems. A Sperm Whale was seen breaching almost vertically far in the distance and a school of over 50 Striped dolphins were seen coming closer and closer to the ship before disappointingly veering away.

The 29/3 saw our run in to St Helena as it appeared on the horizon just after noon some 28nm away. With bird numbers picking up we once again recorded 20 Bulwer's, plus 15 Leach's and 10 Madeiran's while a further 70 petrels remained unidentified. Over 50 Red-billed Tropicbirds with their seemingly endless tails were seen and our first boobies of the Odyssey when 10 Masked Boobies were logged. We made our way up the west coast of the island seeing spectacular red volcanic cliffs and glimpses of trees and grassy meadows at the top of sheltered gorge-like valleys. Brown and the smaller Black Noddies circled round the ship, and our arrival was heralded by the appearance of 20 Rough-toothed Dolphins which escorted us bow-riding towards Jamestown the main town of St Helena.

St Helena is a UK dependent territory and our second oldest colony (1659) after Bermuda (1609). It has an area of 121 Sq kms, roughly half the size of the Isle of Wight and rises to 2,700 feet at Diana's Peak. The local economy is centred mainly on agriculture and fishing. There are some cottage industries and income also comes from honey production and tourism. Philately is a major income and information generator, but the island with a population of about 6,000 continues to rely heavily on British development aid.

After Customs and Immigration officials had cleared the ship we landed late afternoon by zodiac. We were soon seeing some of the island's naturalised birds with a strange line-up of Java Sparrows, Zebra Doves, Madagascar Fodies, Common Waxbills, Yellow Canaries and Common Mynas. Some Fairy Terns were nesting on the cliffs that abutted the harbour wall. We had a few hours to spare before dinner and most of us took the time to explore the lower reaches of Jamestown, a place living in the past and none the worse for it. I decided against walking the 699 steps embedded into the cliff face and known locally as Jacobs ladder. Instead I roamed along Napoleon Street, visited the local library and museum and relaxed in the quaintness of it all.

In the evening most of us headed for a meal at a small restaurant on the waterfront while others had taken the remaining seats at Ann's Place in the Castle Gardens which I later visited. Ann's Place was hosting the annual get together with a concert of the Woman's symphony orchestra of St Helena. Music and stand-up comedy by the compere the local Bishop! was a chance to see island life as it is. It was all so innocent and not of any great standard. I felt ashamed later at having poked fun at it, for it didn't deserve it. I was not the only one to have done so. Afterwards the local bars and the Consulate hotel were visited and copious amounts of alcohol consumed. We returned to the ship at midnight passing Jacob's ladder that was now illuminated like a stairway to the sky.



The next morning 30/3 saw a state of panic as following the early morning wake up call, another call was made that a Whale Shark was swimming around the ship. A mad rush of semi-dressed individuals made their way onto the deck to watch this largest of all fish move very slowly towards the stern of the ship only inches from the surface. It then swam up the starboard side before it repeated the circuit as if doing a lap of honour to the absolute delight of everyone on board. It looked huge and we estimated it to be 8 metres long, but the literature says they can grow up to 16 metres, so really just a medium sized one! Nevertheless what a start to the day and probably going down as the highlight of the Odyssey for some people.

This morning the passengers split into two groups with many going on a 3 hour island tour while the rest, me included, went to see the Wirebird (St Helena Plover) the only surviving endemic land bird, named because of its thin wire-like legs. Seven birds were seen very well and a recently hatched chick. From there we paid a visit to Longwood House where Napoleon was confined for the remaining six years of his life. The house and grounds are now French territory and they are in effect a museum containing some original furniture and some artefacts from Napoleon's time. It was fascinating to reflect on how he might have spent his time there.

Returning back to Jamestown I asked to be dropped off about 2 miles short so that I could amble downhill and enjoy the countryside and suburbs. It was a delightful walk with temperatures in the low 20's. On the way I passed the school and couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it was called Pilling Primary School, motto 'Together as one'. The nearby hospital reminded me that one of our number had been suffering toothache on arriving in Argentina where she had had some dentistry done. It had helped, but every now and then it would flare up again. It was now much better but she had nevertheless arranged to see the local dentist here in Jamestown. Being a British citizen the advice given to her had cost nothing but had she chose to have had an extraction it would have cost her £1.10p. Fillings likewise cost £1.10p but a full set of dentures would have knocked you back £5. Now that's what I call value for money.

The afternoon saw 17 of us join an inshore boat cruise on the *Gannet 111* in search of dolphins and seabirds. With its friendly and experienced crew it didn't take long before we caught up with a group of 50 or so Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphins making high leaps out of the water. Quite a few came close to our boat to ride the bow wave, as we endeavoured to take photographs. Then they left, charging forward like infantry with purpose. We caught up with them again and this time one or two Rough-toothed Dolphins were also seen. After spending a good 45 minutes engaging with them we headed south along the coast. Suddenly we saw an odd looking shape floating about on the sea. On drawing nearer it became clear that we were watching a mating pair of Green Turtles. How lucky was that, as they are rare in St Helena waters.

We carried on to our main objective that of Speery Island where the boat was tossed about in choppy waters making photography nigh on impossible. Here were nesting Fairy Terns, Red-billed Tropicbirds and Masked Boobies. 2 Sooty Terns were also seen and Black Noddies were on nests that looked like they were dripping candle wax, forming stalactite icicles. It was highly exhilarating hanging on for dear life with birds whizzing about here and there and not a hope of photographing them. Returning closer inshore we paid a visit to a rocky bay where many Black and Brown Noddies were roosting and where Madeiran Storm Petrels arrived late afternoon. We saw about 100 of these stocky, broad winged petrels some hanging in the wind over the rocky headland and others just flying around. They have a narrow pale crescentic bar on the upperwing and a very dark underwing. By the time we arrived back at the harbour we had been out for 4 hours in what had been an immensely enjoyable time.

Back on the ship we had a barbecue on a lovely warm evening. Mouth-watering salads complemented the delicious crayfish, spare ribs, spicy sausages, juicy beefburgers, chicken legs, and tender rib-eye steaks washed down with punch, beer, wine or soft drinks. At around 21.00 the Professor Molchanov heaved anchor and we regretfully left St Helena for our 680nm journey to



Ascension Island. I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed St Helena and as a walker would love to return to explore the island on foot. It probably won't happen but I can dream, and if an airport is forthcoming it would be so much easier.

The 31/3 was a quiet, calm day with few birds and a very distant whale fin breaking the surface, species unknown. A Cory's Shearwater was good to see having missed the two earlier ones. 15 Bulwer's Petrels, 10 Madeiran and 5 Leach's were identified with a further 12 indeterminate's at a distance. 2 Red-billed Tropicbirds were also seen and the only Long-tailed Skua of the trip.

April Fools day did not pass without incident. When the 'breakfast is served' call was made at 06.40 instead of 08.15 quite a few were fooled including the Russian waitresses who thought they were late for work. Rinie was also optimistic when he announced Ascension was in sight – a mere 280nm away. At 08.00 the air temperature was rather warm at 26<sup>o</sup>C and another hot day was in prospect. As expected few birds were to be seen from the ship with 15 Leach's overtaking the Madeiran total of 3. An Arctic Tern was seen and a very distant flock of over 500 terns were probably Sooty Terns. Other than that we had to be content with the numerous Flying fish that were seen throughout the day.

After dinner, at the log, an elaborate prank that had started the day before was revealed. A picture claimed to have been taken during the chumming session on 23/3 was chock full with birds, including what looked like a Black-capped Petrel. Peter Simpson showed a picture on his computer taken from a book of another Black-capped petrel which was remarkably similar to that shown the previous evening. Yes you've guessed it, it had been superimposed by another birder Laurence Pitcher who works for Photoshop in a professional capacity, showing just how impossible it is to trust photographs these days.

The next morning found us only a few miles from Ascension, a rather stark volcanic island, quite different in outline from St Helena. We chugged along slowly, escorted by a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins as we made our way to Boatswainbird Island. Once again we were to see a feast of nesting seabirds. All around us birds were coming and going with Masked and Brown Boobies diving into the sea harpoon-like with wings folded back. Hot spots where feeding frenzies were happening could be seen in the distance, where no doubt competition was fierce between Dolphins, Boobies, and Tuna. Black Noddies and Fairy Terns flirted with us and massive Ascension Island Frigatebirds flew sedately overhead. The foreplay was good but the climax was spectacular for when we dropped anchor a blizzard of birds lifted off the stack and speckled the sky, a truly wonderful sight.

This rock stack is the world HQ of the endemic Ascension Island Frigatebird with some 5,000 pairs and we were looking forward to zodiacing the sheltered side. We were not disappointed as we cruised alongside where every ledge, hole and cranny was taken by Black and Brown Noddies, Brown Boobies, Fairy Terns, Red-billed Tropicbirds and two new tropical species the White-tailed Tropicbird and Red-footed Booby. Thousands of Masked Boobies and Ascension frigatebirds occupied the top of the stack with many more wheeling around as cameras clicked and videos panned. Once again our bodies were contorted and necks stretched in order to get that perfect picture. Thousands of images were taken as we twisted our torsos in the rocking zodiac. A combination of half heads, half tails, just sky, just water, blurred images, over and under exposures ensued with now and again that satisfactory picture. Suddenly a few Bottlenose Dolphins appeared, staying around for a few minutes and also a small Manta Ray close to the surface which I was one of the lucky ones to see. It was a magical hour and a half and yet another great experience to stay in the memory for years to come. One of the lasting images in my mind is that of the sitting tropicbirds with their amazingly long tails.

From here we cruised along the coastline enjoying the view, marred only by the high-tech intrusions this strategically placed island has been subjected to. We anchored close to Georgetown near a large cargo ship and made an afternoon landing at the pier where we had to pull ourselves up by ropes on to the steps, similar to what we had to do in St Helena but a little trickier. The adjacent beaches had golden sands and were very inviting but the temperature was in the mid-thirties and there was nowhere to escape the sun's rays. It was a Monday but almost nowhere was open with everyone at work. It was like a ghost town, but a



spick and span ghost town with no litter and nothing to do. Three of the landbirds were seen around the environs: Yellow Canary, Common Myna, and Common Waxbill and the missing one Red-necked Francolin was seen the following day on Green Mountain. The Odsidian hotel was open, probably because it doubled up as a tourist information office from where I bought a touristy T-shirt. The only other place open was the Post Office where at sometime everyone visited, not just for postcards and stamps but because it had air conditioning.

We made our way back to the ship for an early dinner as we were to return to the island for a special evening excursion. On our return we were met by the Ascension Island Conservation staff and shown a short video on the life of the Green Turtle, before splitting into two groups and escorted to the 'nursery' sands at Long Beach. Here we were taken to see one of several huge female turtles depositing their sticky golf ball sized eggs into the pit she had excavated with her flippers. About 120 are laid into an egg chamber before she covers it with a couple of tons of sand. Recently over 70 turtles had been seen in one night. Some people returned early morning the next day to see the last adults returning seawards and to see some of the tiny hatchlings emerging.

Our last day before returning home was spent visiting Green Mountain, the peak of the old volcano and the highest point on Ascension at 2,800 ft high. A convoy of vehicles was at our disposal and I chose the wrong one! I could see the driver looking anxious and soon found out why when some distance short of the summit the radiator started to boil over. We were left to hike our way to the summit but luckily a passing islander took pity on us and took us as far as vehicles were allowed. From there in the cloud cover the temperature was much more agreeable and we explored the immediate area. Land crabs were quite common here where the mosaic of habitats included woodland, grassland and shrubland. I found several specimens of a Long-tailed Blue butterfly ssp, known by the locals including the conservation staff as the blue moth! It makes you wonder what else goes unidentified here.

After lunch we made our way to the Sooty tern colony at Wideawake Fairs, near Mars bay. The terns are known locally as 'Wideawakes' owing to their onomatopoeic calls. We were lucky because they have a 10 month breeding cycle and are not always present at this time of year. Various figures were given as to how many were present in a colony known to have reached about 75,000 pairs. With many birds continuing to arrive it was thought there were currently in the region of 30,000 pairs which was still an awesome sight. We stayed there for about an hour jockeying for position to get the best vantage point to photograph them. It was a fitting finale to a wonderful experience.

All that remained now was to get back to England. Our last meal was served onboard a few hours before disembarking the ship for the last time. At around 21.00 hours fond farewells were made accompanied by music from the doctor's accordion. About half the passengers were staying with the ship for the last leg to the Cape Verde Islands, a further weeks cruising, but for the rest of us it was a long overnight wait at a local 'pub' and the military airport before flying back to RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. It had been a long unforgettable journey, with memories that will stay with me forever, and regardless of the inconveniences it had been very,very good.

From Ushuaia to Georgetown, Ascension Island we had travelled 5556nm, equivalent to 10,290 km or 6431 statute miles and during all that time I never saw another ship until the cargo ship anchored at Ascension. We saw 8 Penguins, 9 Albatrosses, 16 Petrels, 4 Prions, 4 Shearwaters, 7 Storm-Petrels, 2 Tropicbirds, 3 Boobies, 4 Shags, 1 Cormorant, 1 Frigatebird, 5 Skuas, 5 Terns and 2 Noddies not forgetting all the landbirds. In addition we saw 11 Whales, 7 Dolphins, 6 Seals and a South American Sea Lion as well as various other wildlife, most, but not all of which are mentioned in the main body of this report. And my five top birds, well in no particular order: Light-mantled Sooty Albatross, Kerguelen Petrel, Great Shearwater, Inaccessible Island Rail and Lesser Snow petrel.

Barry Dyson



## LA PALMA, CANARY ISLANDS, MAY 2008

Over the last couple of years I have done a fair amount of birding in the Canaries. In February 2006 I went to Fuerteventura (with day trips to La Gomera and the islet of Los Lobos), details are on the club website and included a Spanish national rarity as well as some quality local endemics such as Canary Islands Chat and Houbara Bustard. Last autumn I went to Tenerife, with a day on La Gomera, and saw several more endemics including Canary, Canary Islands Chiff Chaff, Tenerife Kinglet and above all Bolle's and Laurel Pigeon. Last month I took advantage of new direct flights from Manchester to spend a week on La Palma, which is one of the two westernmost islands along with the smaller El Hierro.

La Palma has no Canary endemic species which I had not seen elsewhere, though the excellent views of Laurel Pigeon I obtained at the iconic Los Tilos site were infinitely better than those I had on Tenerife. There are two island endemic subspecies however, *palmae* Chaffinch and *palmensis* African Blue Tit both of which have whitish bellies among their most distinctive ID features and both of which were found without too much difficulty in any wooded area.

Another notable ornithological feature of La Palma is that it is the only one of the Canary Islands that has a population of Choughs of the North African race *barbarus*. A couple of these were seen within an hour of arriving in our resort of Los Cancajos, and during the week flocks of up to 60 were seen in a variety of habitats around the island. The locals are so proud of their Choughs that they are used as a symbol of identity on car stickers and road signs. It feels rather strange to spend a week on an island where all of several hundred corvids seen were Choughs other than a single Raven.

The apartment we were allocated had a sea view, so I did some seawatching from the balcony most evenings before dinner. This was very productive with flocks of up to 320 Cory's Shearwaters in view at one time, up to 27 Little Shearwaters and dolphins of a couple of species on most nights. The highlight though in island terms was during north easterly winds one evening where a pale phase Arctic Skua headed purposefully north, according to Tony Clarke's 'Birds of the Atlantic Islands' there had been no records from the island when it was published in 2004.

There are four main sites for birding highlighted in the guides for the Canaries other than the laurel forest area. One of these, the airport pools, appears to have



largely disappeared during work to extend the terminal building. The Laguna de Barlovento, a concrete banked reservoir, is the largest area of freshwater on the island. In two visits it held up to 300 Yellow-legged Gulls but little else. The reservoir at Puntagorda is much smaller and could probably be passed over in a short visit, we gave it a go and had a Greenshank. There were no waders on the saltpans at Fuencaliente, but other trip reports showed that if we had been earlier in the spring we would have had some success here.

Butterflies were much in evidence during the good weather we enjoyed. These included the endemic subspecies of the Canary Islands Brimstone, which was widespread in laurel forest areas. Whilst the number of bird species seen was low even by Canaries standards, there was plenty of interest to fill a week and the scenery was on a par with anything on Tenerife or the eastern islands. In particular the seawatching was very enjoyable and the chance to get extensive field experience of Little Shearwaters was very welcome.

SD

## **RECENT SIGHTINGS**

Compiled by Stuart Piner. All reports are subject to ratification by the appropriate rarities committees and report compilers.

### **February 2008**

On 2nd February Barry Dyson located the Fylde's second Ross's Goose, an adult white morph with Pink-footed Geese in Stalmine. It later transpired that this well received individual was first seen by local shooters on 31st January, having been present in North Norfolk during the majority of the winter. The bird remained in the Stalmine area until 12th February and roosted on Barnaby's Sands every night.

Aside from the Ross's Goose, scarce geese were rather thin on the ground, with the only Barnacle Geese sightings coming from Head Dyke Lane (2) and Pilling Marsh.

Late news from January related to a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker visiting a garden feeder in Hambleton – a reminder that there may still be hope for those that have still to connect with this near-mythical Fylde species.



The Glossy Ibis was present throughout on Warton Marsh, where a Hen Harrier and at least five Water Pipits were also present. At least six Long-eared Owls and three Bitterns continued to draw observers to Marton Mere, five Ring-necked Parakeets lingered at Lytham Crematorium, two Purple Sandpipers roosted with the Turnstones at Fleetwood Marine Lakes and the three Scaup commuted between Glasson Basin and Conder Pool, where up to three Spotted Redshanks were also wintering. At Knott End the Hooded Crow was last seen on 16th.

Both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were located during the month – a juvenile Glaucous was seen at Knott End on 3rd (presumably the bird seen at Cocker's Dyke in late January) and a juvenile Iceland Gull showed well on Knott End beach on 5th, before relocating to Jameson Road Landfill Site and the adjacent Wyre Estuary, where it was seen intermittently until the 27th.

The only Raven sighting related to a single over Cogie Hill, whilst Short-eared Owls were at Moor Side, Marton Mere and Warton Marsh. A Lapland Bunting was pushed off Pilling Marsh by the high tide on 8th February and a Snow Bunting was on Fleetwood Golf Course on 10th. On 26<sup>th</sup> an unprecedented total of at least 771 Little Gulls were counted flying southwest past Rossall Point by mid afternoon - an amazing total.

### **March 2008**

We had to wait until the final day of March for the month's highlight, but it was well worth the wait – Maurice Jones, Mick and Pauline McGough found the Fylde's third Ross's Gull at Marton Mere just after midday. The powder-pink adult showed well on the Mere until early evening, when it gained height and was never seen again. There are several possible explanations that could account for a Ross's Gull arriving on the Fylde in late March. Perhaps it had wintered in southwest Britain and was making its way north? It could have wintered in the Irish Sea with Little Gulls, or perhaps the northerly winds immediately preceding its occurrence pushed the gull down from a more northerly latitude?

After last being seen in the Stalmine area on 12<sup>th</sup> February, the adult white morph Ross's Goose reappeared on Rawcliffe Moss in early March before relocating to the Pilling area later in the month. Other Over Wyre goose highlights came in the form of a Taiga Bean Goose (presumably the adult also seen in the last few winters), three first-winter Greenland White-fronted Geese and up to five Barnacle Geese.

A male Goshawk over Mythop on both 26<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> was an excellent record and a Black Redstart spent 19<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> near Cocker's Dyke, another visited a St Annes garden on 27<sup>th</sup>. The first Osprey of the spring flew over Ribby Hall on 23<sup>rd</sup> and an adult Iceland Gull commuted between the Wyre Estuary and the adjacent Jameson Road Landfill Site on 24<sup>th</sup>. At nearby Fleetwood Marsh Nature



Park a male Cetti's Warbler was heard singing on 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> and another Osprey flew over Marton Mere on the latter date. A Firecrest was found dead in Lytham on 28<sup>th</sup> and a Snow Bunting was on Fleetwood Golf Course on 30<sup>th</sup>.

Long stayers lingering into March included the Glossy Ibis and at least three Water Pipits at Warton Marsh, up to five Scaup commuting between Conder Pool and Glasson Basin, six Long-eared Owls and a Bittern at Marton Mere, two Purple Sandpipers at Fleetwood Marine Lakes, six Ring-necked Parakeets at Lytham Crematorium and at least six Water Pipits at The Heads, with another nearby on Burrow's Marsh.

Ravens were reported at Glasson Marsh, Dam Side, Eagland Hill, Marton Mere and Cockersand, adult Yellow-legged Gulls were observed at Fleetwood Marine Lakes, Rossall Point and Marton Mere and Short-eared Owls were logged at Eagland Hill, Warton Marsh and Lytham Moss.

#### **April 2008**

Following reports of the adult Ross's Gull on Fairhaven Lake on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, Colin Bushell pinned the bird down in Granny's Bay on 18<sup>th</sup>, much to the delight of those who missed its brief visit to Marton Mere on 31<sup>st</sup> March. This charming gull showed exceptionally well throughout the rest of the month, either on Fairhaven Lake or on the Ribble Estuary, attracting admirers from across the country.

Although the Ross's Gull was undoubtedly the star attraction, it was just one of a number of quality birds observed on the Fylde during April. A grounded Lapland Bunting at Fleetwood Marsh Nature Park was an excellent find by Ian Gardner on 16<sup>th</sup> and Paul Slade discovered a Tundra Bean Goose with the Pink-footed Geese on Pilling Marsh on 13<sup>th</sup>, where it remained throughout the rest of April.

There was a good showing of migrant passerines at mainly coastal locations. Pied Flycatchers were at Bispham on 17<sup>th</sup> and Stanley Park on 28<sup>th</sup>, Redstarts made landfall at Lytham Crematorium, Ridge Farm, Fluke Hall, Brock and Freckleton Naze, Ring Ouzels were discovered and Rossall School and Fleetwood Cemetery and Wood Warbler sightings included four at Stanley Park and one at Rossall School at the end of the month. A pair of Black Redstarts were in Fleetwood Cemetery on 30<sup>th</sup>.

Heavy rain dropped a Curlew Sandpiper at Cockersand on 27<sup>th</sup>, a Hobby was at nearby Thurnham during the previous day, and a Hooded Crow was an excellent discovery at Lytham. A juvenile Iceland Gull frequented Jameson Road Landfill Site and the adjacent Wyre Estuary throughout the month, whilst it or another visited Fleetwood Marine Lakes on 1<sup>st</sup>. Adult Yellow-legged Gulls were noted at Marton Mere on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> and Fleetwood Freeport on 9<sup>th</sup>.



Marton Mere hosted a pair of Garganey on 6<sup>th</sup> and an Osprey also flew over, the first of two Ospreys to fly over Marton Mere during April. The pair of Garganey commuted between Mythop and Marton Mere until 20<sup>th</sup> and Ospreys were also noted over Fleetwood, Rossall Point, Lytham and Clifton Marsh during April. Meanwhile Mythop held a Wood Sandpiper between 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>.

April was an excellent month for Avocets; two flew over Rossall Point on 9<sup>th</sup>, one was at Sowerby on 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, a couple were on Warton Marsh on 20<sup>th</sup> and two were at Freckleton Naze on 22<sup>nd</sup>. Ravens were seen at Cockerham (3), Glasson (2), Thornton, Mythop, Rawcliffe Moss, Cockersand, Pilling and Newton Marsh, Marsh Harriers flew over Lytham Moss and Warton Marsh and a Long-eared Owl was at Warton. Rossall Point produced a male Hen Harrier on 21<sup>st</sup> and Short-eared Owl on 22<sup>nd</sup>. Seawatching highlights included a Black-throated Diver past Starr Gate on 9<sup>th</sup>, two Little Terns past Rossall Point on 22<sup>nd</sup> and a singleton on 29<sup>th</sup>.

Long-stayers included the Glossy Ibis and up to six Water Pipits at Warton Marsh, another six Water Pipits at The Heads, five Scaup commuted between Conder Pool and Glasson Basin, two Long-eared Owls at Marton Mere, a couple of Purple Sandpipers at Fleetwood Marine Lakes, Ross's Goose and Barnacle Goose on Pilling Marsh, four Mandarins at Bispham Marsh and four Ring-necked Parakeets Lytham Crematorium.

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### **Club News In Brief**

- The Club has been successful in applying for a £500 grant from the Green Partnership Awards scheme. The grant will be used to assist the Club's Farmland Bird Nest box and Feeding scheme. (31 chicks ringed at Todderstaffe so far this season).
- The Orchard End (at Eagland Hill) Windfarm Planning application was rejected.
- The Black tailed Godwits at Newton Marsh lost their first clutch to a fox. A replacement clutch has been laid and incubation is well advanced. Phone Carol Coupe on 01995 642251 if you can help with wardening.

PE

