

Trip Report – Flock at Sea AGAIN! 2017

MSC Sinfonia from Cape Town to southern edge of the South African EEZ (Indian and Atlantic oceans) and back to Cape Town, 24-28 April 2017

The first day saw a delayed departure, which meant that there was somewhat less time for birding than originally envisaged. Nevertheless, such was the passion for a great trip list that we picked up almost all the expected inshore seabirds – penguins, terns, cormorants, etc. Overnight the ship steamed SSE, and at 05h30 I presented myself on the Bridge, to discuss final positions with the Captain. With assistance from his able officers and electronic data, I identified an eddy in a westerly direction, and as dawn broke we passed into a patch of water that has now become famous. Almost as soon as it was light some sensational birds started to arrive, including Sooty Albatross and Grey Petrel. As the morning continues, more exceptional sightings arrived, capped (by a very long yard) by a sensational flyby from a Light-mantled Albatross!

Day 2 saw us attempt to repeat Day 1, targeting a similar feature but one located over Natal Seamount. Unfortunately, for reasons that remain unclear, there were very few birds around, and nothing approaching the previous day (which was a good 12 hours steam to the west, and therefore out of reach). An attempt at chumming with 75 kg frozen blocks of ice and fish was unsuccessful, as the power from the propeller wash caused the blocks to disintegrate and melt in minutes, despite the Captain holding the ship a <1.5 kn, the slowest speed safety permitted. Crippling views of a White-headed Petrel, which came in to investigate the third block, was the only highlight. Birding waxed and waned through the day, and the trip list slowly mounted as we found species that are typical of a day trip pelagic out of Cape Town.

Thursday, Day 3, saw us moving slowly towards Cape Town, crossing the shelf slope into shallower water and then repositioning to transect across the slope and back into much deeper water. We passed several trawlers, each with an attendant flock of hundreds of seabirds – which had the effect of ensuring there were few birds interested in checking out our ship! We were encouraged to see photographs of those trawlers flying their Albatross Task Force-designed bird scaring lines! In the late afternoon a couple of small shearwaters were called – potentially Subantarctic and Little shearwaters, although official confirmation is still pending.

The bird species below represents the list that the guides have accepted. Some species on this list are in the rarities section, because we would ordinarily treat these as rarities and request supporting information. In addition, if anyone onboard feels there are species seen that are not on this list, please contact Trevor Hardaker directly. Trevor is chair of BirdLife South Africa's rarity committee, and would welcome submissions of evidence to support additional species that could be included on this list.

Dr Ross Wanless
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BirdLife South Africa

Albatross	Comments	Rarities Committee
Wandering	Common on Tuesday morning; a few on Wednesday	Not required
Shy	Commonest albatross overall	Not required
Black-browed	Surprisingly scarce - a smattering on all days	Not required
Indian Yellow-nosed	Common especially on Thursday	Not required
Atlantic Yellow-nosed	A few on Thursday	Not required
Light-mantled	1 seen well Tuesday morning; another distant bird later on Tuesday	Photo evidence, awaiting formal RC adjudication
Sooty	1 immature and several adults on Tuesday morning, another claimed on Thursday	Photo evidence, awaiting formal RC adjudication
Petrels		
Northern Giant	1 nice adult on Wednesday; several immature birds	Not required
Southern Giant	1 confirmed Wednesday morning	Not required
White-chinned	Common especially over the shelf	Not required
Grey	1 followed the ship early on Tuesday for some time; another briefly seen at range later in the day	Photo evidence, awaiting formal RC adjudication
White-headed	Surprisingly common in oceanic waters - several photographed	Photo evidence, awaiting formal RC adjudication
Soft-plumaged	Common mainly in oceanic waters	Not required
Great-winged	Commonest petrel in oceanic waters	Not required
Shearwaters		
Sooty	Scarce, mainly over the shelf. One showed well during chumming on Wednesday morning	Not required
Cory's	Fairly common, mainly over the shelf	Not required
Great	Fairly common, mainly over the shelf	Not required
Manx	1-2 sightings over the shelf	Not required
Prions		
Salvin's	At least one bird photographed on Tuesday afternoon shows characters of this species	
Antarctic	Most prions assumed to be this species	Not required
Storm Petrels		

Black-bellied	Several in oceanic waters	Not required
European	A few seen on the shelf break among Wilson's Storm Petrels	Not required
Wilson's	The commonest storm petrel	Not required
Other		
Cape Cormorant	Common inshore	Not required
Bank Cormorant	10 or so roosting on channel buoys on Monday evening	Not required
Crowned Cormorant	Several roosting in the harbour	Not required
White-breasted Cormorant	Several roosting in the harbour	Not required
Subantarctic Skua	1 on Monday evening; regular on Wednesday morning and Thursday	Not required
African Penguin	Fairly common on Monday evening	Not required
Cape Gannet	Common over the shelf	Not required
Hartlaub's Gull	Common inshore	Not required
Kelp Gull	Common inshore	Not required
Arctic Tern	Several groups of 2-3 birds over oceanic waters	Not required
Greater Crested (Swift)	Common inshore	Not required
<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	One seen, possible Pomarine but definitive identification considered not possible	
Honourable mentions		
Cape fur seal	Common over the shelf	
Long-finned pilot whale	Pod on Thursday afternoon	
Bryde's whale	One in wake on Thursday?	
Striped dolphin	Large school on Wednesday afternoon	
Heaviside's dolphin	1-2 in Table Bay on Monday evening	
Mako shark		
Blue shark		
Species called for which BirdLife South Africa Rarities Committee requests submission of record with supporting information		
Salvin's Albatross	1 claimed Tuesday morning	No photo evidence currently available

Tristan Albatross	1 claimed Wednesday afternoon - identification criteria untested	No photo evidence currently available
Blue Petrel	1 claimed on Tuesday morning	No photo evidence currently available
Kerguelen Petrel	1 claimed on Tuesday; at least 1 image taken at the time was a dark morph Soft-plumaged Petrel	No photo evidence currently available
Subantarctic Shearwater	Claimed on Thursday	No photo evidence currently available
Little Shearwater	Claimed on Thursday	No photo evidence currently available
Leach's Storm Petrel	Claimed on Tuesday	No photo evidence currently available
Antarctic Tern	One claimed, highly unusual for pelagic waters	No photo evidence currently available