

# BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA news



MELISSA WHITECROSS

## FLOCK AT SEA *again!* 2017



The screen in front of me was not showing what I wanted to see. It was 05h30 on Tuesday, 25 April, our first morning of birding, and I was on the bridge of the MSC *Sinfonia* with the captain and his staff, standing around a chart and the map of sea surface temperatures on the computer. I needed to find something that would give us a chance of good seabird abundance, or perhaps a few rare species that prefer deep, cold water. But all I could see was a uniform 16 °C in all directions. The nearest patch of cold water was a good six hours' steam away and well outside South Africa's exclusive economic zone. The radio operator then clicked on a different layer and the screen brought up sea current data. A massive river of water – the Agulhas Current – was flowing swiftly

just north of our position. My eye caught a feature off to the west, where the current split and a swirl, or eddy, had formed. Eddies concentrate things – and birds know this. With nothing else to shoot for, and the prospect of a long, slow day of birding, I asked the captain to steer through this feature.

The rest is history. I headed out to the bow deck to see how things would pan out and soon after it got light the guides started calling a staggering array of species: Blue Petrel, Sooty Albatross, Grey Petrel ... and they kept on coming! As I went looking for people to advise them to get on deck and start birding, the call came over my radio: 'Light-mantled Albatross!' Peter Ryan happened to be with me and we dashed out to port deck 6,



FRANCOIS DU PLESSIS



TANIA ANDERSON



GARY CUSINS



MARK D. ANDERSON (4)



LIZET GROBBELAAR



GARY CUSINS



8



FRANCOIS DU PLESSIS



10



11



12

CARIN MALAN

1. Thousands of excited BirdLife South Africa supporters gathered on the upper deck of the MSC *Sinfonia* as she departed from Cape Town harbour.
2. Without doubt the bird of the trip: a spectacular Light-mantled Albatross.
3. BirdLife South Africa Board of Directors member Dawie Chamberlain and BirdLife South Africa CEO Mark D. Anderson on board.
4. Wandering Albatrosses were seen each day.
5. Samson Mulaudzi, Ian Owtram, Martin Taylor, Themba Mthembu, Bheki Mbonambi, Bheki Nyandeni, Dale Forbes (Swarovski).
6. Lunn Steven accepting the Zeiss binoculars he won in the lucky draw from Gail Giordani, MD of Zeiss South Africa.
7. White-headed Petrels were relatively common, despite being new to most people's South African lists.
8. The decks of the *Sinfonia* were constantly crammed with birders.
9. Despite being a massive rarity, the comment that this was 'just a Sooty Albatross' places the quality of the birding in context!
10. Passengers donned penguin outfits to celebrate World Penguin Day.
11. The Penguin Pledges Colony grew throughout the voyage.
12. Peter Harrison and Peter Steyn enjoyed some great pelagic birding.





MARK D. ANDERSON (3)



above Flock guides John Graham, Vernon Head and David Allan.

top When the birding was cooking, the decks heaved with birders.

above, right World Penguin Day was celebrated in style.

with Peter grinning from ear to ear. 'It's not supposed to be here!' he exclaimed. Yet here it was, the bird beyond anyone's wildest dreams, in South African waters and before an audience of thousands!

That first morning was an extravagant success. It was not going to be

repeated, but that didn't matter. Flock at Sea AGAIN! 2017 had already bagged some phenomenal birds and any more would only be the icing on a very good cake. The attempt at chumming was a rank failure because, despite the slow speed (1.4 knots), the volume of water from the ship's massive propeller still caused the 75-kilogram frozen blocks to disintegrate and disappear within minutes. Lesson learnt! One consolation from getting excessively smelly through that exercise was that the last block brought a White-headed Petrel very close in astern, affording crippling views to close on a thousand birders.

We had Wandering Albatrosses coming in throughout the trip, as well as plenty of other great birds. John Graham had jury-rigged a dripline from stern deck 6, from which we kept a steady trickle of anchovy oil going each day. This undoubtedly ensured that many species chose to investigate the ship a little more closely than they otherwise would have done.

Another highlight was provided by Peter Harrison, the drawcard lecturer and author-illustrator of several seabird identification guides. Peter believes that he and Jonathan Rossouw, who was also guiding for us, have figured out how to separate Tristan Albatross from Wandering Albatross at sea. And while we were eagerly awaiting a treatise on this, he called a Tristan while guiding, later confirming through photographs that the bird was indeed a dead ringer for a Tristan Albatross!

The nominal purpose of the cruise was, of course, to hold the BirdLife South Africa Annual General Meeting. This potentially somewhat dry event was enlivened by a re-enactment of the legendary Monty Python 'Live at the Hollywood Bowl' skit, where John Cleese dressed in drag attempts to sell an albatross snack in a packed theatre. On a more serious note, Roger Wanless, the chairman of our board, paid tribute to four supporters who passed away in recent months: Roy Cowgill, Barrie Rose, Jill Stainforth and Ntombi Situngu. Professor Les Underhill was presented with the Gill Memorial Award for his lifetime contribution to ornithology, and finally

Mark Brown announced that the Bird of the Year for 2018 would be the African Black Oystercatcher, highlighting a great conservation success story that the former director of the FitzPatrick Institute, the late Professor Phil Hockey, would have been delighted to witness.



Flock is an opportunity to showcase some of the work that BirdLife South Africa has done and being at sea this year made the seabird theme particularly relevant. World Penguin Day on 25 April saw the launch of our Penguin Promises, a 'colony' of penguin cut-outs bearing promises from passengers to do things that will support healthy oceans. Then too there were Penguin Pledges, which raised more than R50 000 for our penguin conservation work (although we still need to see the money!). We are particularly grateful to Gail Giordiani, CEO of Zeiss, who donated R20 000 towards our penguin work.

As expected, each of Peter Harrison's lectures brought the house down. But for those who grew tired of adding lifers to their lists, the other speakers also delivered fabulous entertainment. Peter Ryan launched an appeal to raise money for eradicating the invasive mice at Marion Island, asking birders to sponsor a hectare. While we build the website and engine to drive that fundraising initiative, Peter's dramatic footage and impeccable conservation case meant that by the time the cruise was over, we had secured pledges for more than 100 hectares of Marion Island. There are 29 000 hectares up for grabs, but it's good to see some serious interest.

ROSS WANLESS, PROGRAMME MANAGER:  
SEABIRD CONSERVATION

## FLOCK AT SEA AGAIN! 2017 SPECIES CHECKLIST

	Comments	Rarities Committee
<b>ALBATROSSES</b>		
Wandering	Common on Tuesday morning; a few on Wednesday	Not required
Shy	Most common albatross overall	Not required
Black-browed	Surprisingly scarce, with 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 on Tuesday morning; another distant bird later on Tuesday	Photo evidence accepted
Sooty	1 immature and several adults on Tuesday morning; another claimed on Thursday	Photo evidence accepted
<b>PETRELS</b>		
Northern Giant	1 nice adult on Wednesday; several immature birds	Not required
Southern Giant	1 confirmed on Wednesday morning	Not required
White-chinned	Common, especially over the shelf	Not required
Grey	1 followed the ship early on Tuesday; another seen briefly at range later in the day	Photo evidence accepted
White-headed	Surprisingly common in oceanic waters; several photographed	Photo evidence accepted
Soft-plumaged	Common mainly in oceanic waters	Not required
Great-winged	Most common petrel in oceanic waters	Not required
<b>SHEARWATERS</b>		
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
<b>PRIONS</b>		
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
<b>STORM PETRELS</b>		
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 most common storm petrel	Not required
<b>OTHER</b>		
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) Tern	Common inshore	Not required
<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	1 seen, possible Pomarine but definitive ID considered not possible	
<b>HONOURABLE MENTIONS</b>		
Cape fur seal, Long-finned pilot whale, Bryde's whale, Striped dolphin, Heaviside's dolphin, Mako shark, Blue shark		
<b>Species called for which BLSA Rarities Committee requests submission of record with supporting information</b>		
Salvin's Albatross	1 claimed Tuesday morning	Photo evidence requested
Tristan Albatross	1 claimed Wednesday afternoon, identification criteria untested	Photo evidence requested
Kerguelen Petrel	1 claimed on Tuesday; at least 1 image taken was a dark morph Soft-plumaged Petrel	Photo evidence requested
Subantarctic Shearwater	Claimed on Thursday	Photo evidence requested
Little Shearwater	Claimed on Thursday	Photo evidence requested
Leach's Storm Petrel	Claimed on Tuesday	Photo evidence requested
Antarctic Tern	1 claimed, highly unusual for pelagic waters	Photo evidence requested