

## EASTERN FRENCH POLYNESIA AND PITCAIRN, HENDERSON AND OENO ISLANDS – Two Weeks in Pterodroma Paradise! Chris Gaskin

This is a report on a two week seabird birdwatching expedition to Pitcairn, Henderson, Oeno and eastern French Polynesian islands. We spent two days in Tahiti beforehand. Species list included.



6 June: Eight of us plus Graham Wragg (skipper) flew from Tahiti to Mangareva, Gambier Islands in the morning to join *RV Bounty Bay* plus its crew. They had just arrived there from Rarotonga (via Papeete). After completing French customs clearance, we wandered round the main settlement (amazing to visit a place with no land birds, not even a single myna or pigeon, just several Wandering Tattlers on the shore, dock and occasionally scurrying across roof tops). We did some extra provisioning, chomped on ice creams and took on two extra passengers for Pitcairn. We departed Mangareva at 1700hrs, slipping out through the lagoon and past several high islands. Other than noddies and terns, nothing much seen in terms of birds. Tried spotlighting on the way but no joy.

7 June: Pitcairn lies 600kms SE of Mangareva and the weather conditions for our first day at sea couldn't have been better: NE wind 5-10knots (kns), easterly swell of 2-3m (plus a counter swell from the SW of 1m), and partly overcast conditions. The barometer and spirits were high, with a good variety of birds coming through at regular intervals. A wedge-tailed shearwater slipped through at dawn, then it wasn't long before we had to come to grips with the region's Pterodroma species: Kermadec Petrel (*neglecta*) in three phases; Herald Petrel (*heraldica*) with one or two or three phases (depending on who you read); a Henderson's Petrel (*atrata*) that may or may not exist (depending on who you read or talk to); Murphy's Petrel (*ultima*); Tahiti Petrel (*Pseudobulweria rostrata*); and some enigmatic Phoenix/Herald types which are going to require further work. All these birds will be discussed further in species notes below. White-necked Petrel (*cervicalis*) and two probable Black-winged Petrels (*nigripennis*) completed the Pterodroma lineup for the day. We also saw a Bryde's Whale with a small calf.

8 June: Fine weather and wind down to 5-10kns NE. Another day of tackling Pterodroma ID – same birds, same problems, great discussion with everyone really involved. Three Murphy's Petrels were seen on the water, one feeding on a large squid. West of Pitcairn is a nice rise (sea



mount) which we decided to check out. As we approached it we caught a wahoo (this in turn revealed five trigger fish in its gut) and then had a Minke Whale trailing along in our wake for a while. When we finally located the seamount the Minke sought us out again and hung around while we set the chum: several Tahiti and Murphy's Petrels plus a White-bellied Storm Petrel (*Fregetta grallaria*) and the Minke were an intriguing return my first tropical chum session. Given the reasonable sea conditions most of us slipped into the water and joined the Minke for some extraordinary viewing. I found that if I swam down two or three metres the whale would approach, curious, then arc away before swimming back again and again (Huub took some great photos). Back on board we set our course for Pitcairn once again. A Sooty Shearwater broke into the procession of Murphy's, Tahiti's and the occasional Kermadec Petrels. We reached Pitcairn very late that night. Only three of us were up: the island a remarkable-looking chunk of old volcano looming out of the dark.





9 June: At daybreak we found ourselves anchored in the lee of the steep uninhabited side of Pitcairn. There was a big swell breaking against the rocks at the base of the cliffs. Frigatebirds soared in the sky overhead, Black and Brown Noddies shuttled through along with White Terns, Murphy's Petrels, Red-tailed Tropicbirds and Blue-grey Noddies (Grey Ternlets). At 0800hrs the longboat from the island came out to meet us with customs officials, the mayor and some of the locals on board. After some discussion and stamping of passports (2007 instead of 2006!) we all leapt aboard the longboat for the ride to the landing on the other side of the island. Quite the experience, especially surfing into the little 'harbour' behind the seawall. Once ashore it didn't take long to sight the one land bird, the Pitcairn Reed Warbler or 'sparrow' as the locals call it (*Acrocephalus vaughani*). After making the climb up the steep road to Adamstown (up the Road of Difficulty) we ambled as a group through the paved streets, before splitting up to explore the island further. A number of us went to the highest point; two walking up there in the morning, several others hitched rides with locals on their quads after lunch. I was quite taken with the set-up at the top – several deck chairs, a couple of picnic tables, some pine trees for shade, a 'Public Toilet' and a view to die for! The island is quite fertile and gardens are quite extensive, fairly typical Polynesian-style cultivation: lots of fruit such as bananas, papaya, guava, oranges and so forth. One could say quite the bountiful place. It was a very hot day and it was great to be able to walk along, picking up oranges that had fallen on the road and suck them clean. We had a sumptuous lunch laid on with generous hospitality by Betty and Tom Christian. The visit to their house 'Down Fletcher' was also a chance to buy T-shirts and other souvenirs. After lunch there was some more exploring. Overhead Kermadec Petrels displayed, calling with a sharp raptor-like call; also White Terns flying amongst the trees and gardens; White-tailed Tropicbirds circling against the sky and rock peaks, and Blue-grey Noddies ducking into holes on the cliffs above the landing. Leslie Jacques, the Pitcairn Commissioner who I'd met in NZ took me for a quad ride and showed me some of the sights at the eastern end. Late afternoon we were all back down at the landing waiting for our boat to turn up. The lads on board *Bounty Bay* had been working on one of the engines and had been delayed. I decided the long boat was our best option to get back out to the boat, as the swell was up and the idea of ferrying everyone back and forth in the zodiacs had lost its appeal. In very quick time a crew for one of the boats was mustered and with everyone heaving on ropes and yelling the huge aluminum longboat was soon careering down the slip into the sea. Great fun! Ten minutes later we were back on board *Bounty Bay*, waving good bye to an assorted collection of friendly islanders, the doctor and a couple of social workers from New Zealand, and soon on our way towards Henderson Island. One of our passengers to Pitcairn had not got the relevant papers and was refused clearance to land, which meant we carried him two extra days until the island's council approved his request to stay a few weeks.

10 June: At dawn we were well on our way to Henderson (the island came into sight at 0830hrs); clear overhead, no wind with a 3m SW swell behind us. We picked up a nice variety of birds on this stretch, including good looks at the three phases of Kermadec Petrels and a South Polar Skua. Henderson Island lies 200km to the NE of Pitcairn, it's a World Heritage Site, and although teeming with birds it's nothing like its former self. Polynesians inhabited the island in small numbers in prehistoric times, and they had an effect on bird populations although not as devastating as elsewhere in the Pacific. Birds such as Polynesian Storm Petrel, Tuamotu Sandpiper and two pigeons no longer breed on Henderson (Steadman & Olson, and Wragg in separate studies). The Polynesian rat (*Rattus exulens*) is still present. The island is an uplifted atoll 37sq kms in area with remarkable-looking limestone ramparts along the SW coast, especially with huge waves breaking against them sending spray high in the sky and over the cliff



crests of highly weathered and pinnacled limestone. Vegetation is dominated by pandanus with smaller trees, with ice plant and shrub covered slopes on the cliff-edge and ledges.

We did a sedate circumnavigation round the southern end and up the eastern coast. Many *Pterodroma* were flying over the island, good numbers displaying in pairs, also White Terns, Greater Frigatebirds, Red-tailed Tropicbirds, boobies and noddies. Also, Reef Heron, Wandering Tattler, our first Bristle-thighed Curlews and glimpses of the Henderson Island Lorikeet (*Vini stephni*). There are three beaches on Henderson (all protected by reefs and narrow lagoons) and we cruised along each checking conditions for a landing: huge waves on the western side of the island and another set of waves from the NE ruled out two of the beaches. By the time we were finally off the northern beach (which offered the best landing) it was getting too late to go ashore and instead of just anchoring, decided to head away from the island a couple of kms for a chumming session. Murphy's, Henderson, Kermadec and Herald Petrels, plus one of these black-headed Herald/Phoenix-types. Also Tahiti Petrel, and Red-footed and Masked Boobies. Heading back to the island a Wandering Tattler flying alongside (also heading for the island) got everyone quite excited for a moment (what the ....? then realisation).

11 June: In the morning we had fine weather again with little wind, but the surf breaking over the reef on North Beach had us concerned about getting everyone ashore. The landing is through a very narrow gap in the reef into a narrow, shallow lagoon which fills with each big wave then empties in a great surge through the same gap. Can be rather tricky. Graham, Huub, and I tested



the waters and managed to scoot through; low tide meant we nicked the prop of the outboard on a rock. No real problems, but we decided to hold off bringing everyone else ashore until the tide came in further. On shore I was able to seek out the four all-important endemic land birds: the lory, Henderson Island Fruit-dove (*Ptilinopus insularis*), Henderson Island Rail (*Porzana atra*) and Henderson Island Warbler (*Acrocephalus taiti*). Graham, who did his PHD on the Henderson birds (a palaeontological study) and was skipper of the support vessel for Michael Brooke's lengthy study (1995), was an excellent guide and knowing the route up the cliffs was a real bonus. Just after lunch we had everyone safely ashore, a case of Graham in the zodiac timing the waves and having two of us positioned on the reef to manhandle the boat once it was through. No doubt landing on Henderson was a major highlight of this trip and the time we spent ashore flew by. Got very good looks at all the birds, and spent some of our time up on a ledge on the cliff face watching the various *Pterodroma* species fly by at close range. The overhanging ledge was a prehistoric habitation site with an archaeological dig at one end. The BT curlews also put on a great show with 15 or so landing on the cliff-top above us. Down on the beach we found Masked Boobies, one Brown Booby, Murphy's Petrels, the curious curlews and Wandering Tattlers. We'd kept one eye on the tide and waves and when the surf started to build again decided to ferry everyone back to the boat, a couple of us swimming back. At 1810hrs we upped anchor and were on our way back to Pitcairn, a detour on the original plan necessitated by earlier problems with the water-maker and the need to land Neil, the Pitcairn visitor astray with his permit. Still, we made the most of the run and I was keen to check out a seamount to the east of Pitcairn (one of two), the islanders call it Forty Mile Reef (the second I guess must be called Fifty Mile Reef). This decision produced a good result – see below.



12 June: Our first stormy day with winds around 15kns NE, showers, big wind-driven waves and a 3-4m high swell (also from the NE). All coming from behind us so it didn't stop most of us taking up our usual positions on the top deck. Found that the reef, but not where it was shown on the charts (!) and

picked up a White-bellied Storm Petrel skipping along through the waves a little while later. Decided to stop for a chumming session (despite the conditions, as the wind was now up to 20kns) and almost immediately had a Polynesian Storm Petrel bounding across the waves towards us, such a big storm petrel and a great thrill to see it. Unfortunately two of the group missed it. One, possibly two White-bellied Storm Petrels (see below in species notes) came through with Kermadec and Murphy's Petrels. The run through to Pitcairn was quite fruitful with plenty to discuss: one Black (Parkinson's) Petrel swept in accompanied by Henderson's and Murphy's Petrels (one of each), another White-bellied Storm Petrel, plenty of Murphy's, Kermadec and Herald Petrels plus another one of our black-headed Herald-Phoenix types. As we drew close to Pitcairn the numbers of birds increased markedly with two feeding groups, one a very large mob of 40+ Brown Noddies, 20+ White Terns, 2 Greater Frigatebirds, 1 Brown Booby, 1 Kermadec Petrel and several Blue-grey Noddies. By 1700hrs we were anchored off Tedside at the northwestern end, as much in the 'lee' of Pitcairn as we could manage. We watched mesmerized by the very impressive surf curling round the northwest headland of the island, about 150m from the boat. Another swell rolled in from the north and the gusts of wind ripped through occasionally. While at anchor a juvenile Wandering Albatross came through. Pterodroma sp milling round the island. A bit rolly overnight but not too bad.

13 June: Conditions were a little brighter in the morning but no-one envied Graham making a couple of runs in the zodiac to collect water. While the crew sorted out the boat the rest of us were quite happy to laze, read, do a bit of fishing, birdwatching (of course), gaze at the island, all the while continuing the discussion on the problematic birds we had seen to that stage. At 1100hrs we were on our way towards Oeno (180kms to the NW). Wind dropped away through the afternoon, quite quiet on the bird front, although I see from my notes a white-ish Pterodroma was seen at a distance. Arrived at Oeno 0200hrs next morning.



14 June: Oeno is an atoll with two islands inside a reef, one no more than a stretch of sand and coral, the other much larger and forested, most of it native vegetation. Rats had been removed a few years back and the place is rarely visited, even by Pitcairn Islanders for whom it's been something of a holiday camp. A big swell rolled in from two directions, one driving big surf through the only channel into the lagoon. No chance of getting through and making a landing. Instead we spent the day outside the reef (the turquoise lagoon inside the reef looked so inviting), watching as seabirds wheeled above the island. It was very frustrating not to land. We would have been able to do a reasonable survey of the island in the time available. We did, however, get very good looks at birds flying in towards (and away from) the island, especially when we moved to a spot as close to the main island as the reef allowed. Murphy's, Kermadec and Herald Petrels; some more of the Herald/Phoenix-type birds; Red-footed and Masked Boobies; Sooty and White Terns; Black, Brown and Blue-grey Noddies; Red-tailed Tropicbirds. Two Northern Giant Petrels drifted in and landed nearby. Late morning we ambled off for a chumming session for good looks at Murphy's, Kermadec, Herald and Henderson Petrels. Saw one Kermadec with a very dark head and white throat, another harassing a Red-tailed Tropicbird. Interestingly we came across a dead Red-tailed Tropicbird floating in the water with one of the giant petrels beside it, its intent fairly obvious. While we were drifting at our chumming location a medium-sized whale rose to the surface about 30m behind the boat, one blow and it just dropped below the surface, staying in view for a little while before disappearing. Didn't surface again but colouration (brown) and the amount of white in the belly area suggested a Minke Whale. Mid-afternoon we checked out the entrance to the lagoon but nothing had changed so anchored. Some of us went snorkeling and a couple did a dive along the outside of the reef. Plenty of sharks around to Matt's delight. One big yellow-fin tuna was sighted both above and below the water. Had an early dinner then got underway, heading SW towards Portland Bank, an intriguing seamount to the east of the Gambier Islands (just south of the atoll Temoe). I'd seen it on charts and GEODAS NOAA data sheets; unfortunately we passed it at night when we were sailing to Pitcairn at the start of the trip.





15 June: At sea and by first light it was clear we were going to have a stunning day: wind barely above zero, sea glassy and little swell. All rather quiet with just a few birds (Murphy's, Henderson, Kermadec and one probable Tahiti Petrel), one whale sighting (probably a Fin Whale) and plenty of flying fish.

16 June: Conditions-wise more of the same. Birds seen through the early morning were mostly boobies, White Terns and Murphy's Petrels. We did get some good looks at one of our Phoenix-type birds, and a Tahiti flew through not long afterwards. By 0930hrs we were closing in on the Portland Bank, and started picking up quite a lot of activity: boobies, frigatebirds, tropicbirds, noddies and terns with a few Pterodroma (mostly Murphy's). By 0945 we were crossing Portland Bank, the bottom could be seen 15-20m below, a large plateau eroded flat by wave action, quite a remarkable place several kms across. We opted to move to the western side of the reef, working on the notion of a 'nutrient plume' and did pick up some feeding groups, working above very active schools of small tuna. Fishing was a big success with a number of trevally and one large wahoo landed. While tracking one feeding group we picked up a small to medium-sized shearwater at close range (see below in species notes for ID and discussion) and an intermediate



phase Kermadec petrel. But overall the species diversity was disappointing. Absolutely calm conditions. With plenty of daylight time on our hands we decided to cut our losses and opt for a long loop around the Gambier Islands to try and pick up elusive storm petrels and shearwaters (the high peaks of Mangareva could be seen on the horizon). We had luck with three Fregetta sp (probably White-bellied but couldn't get close enough to any of these to rule out Black-bellied), but had no joy with either Polynesian storm petrel or shearwaters. That is, until right on

dusk when a small dark shearwater crossed the bow with most people inside and digging in the fridge for beers! A case of "you booze, you lose" I guess. Probable Christmas Shearwater.

17 June: Next morning, we were well to the west of the Gambier Islands, our destination the uninhabited atoll Morane. Once again, a brilliant day but little or no wind meant stops for chumming would be fruitless. We did try once after spying a White-naped Petrel, while Huub served a stream of delicious pizzas. But aside from satisfying our taste buds this session produced only a couple of Murphy's. So, very few birds during most of the day, fortunately the numbers increased dramatically the last few kms to Morane. But, as soon as we arrived we could see the same problem about getting ashore. Once again two swells were working against each other. Morane is an atoll with motu (islands) around the edge and a large central lagoon, in other words a fairly typical Pacific atoll. The only problem here is that the break in the reef is hardly a channel at all and the reef-edge a mass of treacherous coral. Any areas where the reef platform was continuous and relatively smooth were washed with big breakers. Impressive, but frustrating. On shore we could see Tuamotu Sandpipers moving above the trees and between islands, their weird flight making them look more like fluttery larks, with their rounded wings and fluttery flight. Some of us did catch sight of a Long-tailed Cuckoo (koel) as it dashed between two motu close together. Over land or onshore we could pick out Bristle-thighed Curlew, Wandering Tattler; Reef Herons; boobies; frigatebirds; tropicbirds; Grey-blue, Black and Brown Noddies; and Murphy's, Kermadec and Herald Petrels. The frigatebirds were breeding males on nests with their red gular pouches inflated; at a distance looking like fishing buoys stuck in the trees. We noted the distribution of birds (i.e. which islands different species were favouring), then anchored in the lee of the easternmost. A decision was made to stay on overnight and see what the morning brought in terms of weather and swell conditions. We all hoped to get ashore, the islands looked amazing.



18 June: Woke to strong winds and a big sea running around most of the atoll. While conditions didn't appear to be very different where we were, a landing was still not going to be possible. We spent the morning cruising very slowly along the reef edge, getting as close as we could to shore.

We got onto a number of Tuamotu Sandpipers, especially one pair that favoured an area of vegetation just above the beach. Some of the sandpipers came down onto the beach and coral reef. We had no luck with ground doves despite a determined search (through bins and scopes) amongst the understory and vegetation of all the motu we got close to. Other highlights were the sharks, mostly black-tipped reef, but also some grey reef sharks. At 1100hrs we departed Morane with a big swell from the SW, wind-driven waves and 15kn wind from the south and overcast conditions: though not unpleasant if you sat up on top and went with the roll. Once again, fairly low pickings in terms of birds, just a single sighting of a large roqual (big possibly Fin Whale) and a possible great-winged petrel (showing pale face but no white underwing), to enliven an otherwise predictable lineup of Murphy's and Kermadec petrels, white terns, and masked and red-footed boobies.

19 June: At dawn the Gambier Islands could be seen to the east. Conditions had eased overnight but so were the number of birds. Very quiet, even when we tried a chumming session outside the lagoon. Just one Brown Booby! Mangareva lagoon is about 25 kms in diameter, sheltered by an outer reef, and containing two dozen extinct volcanic islands and a few coral atolls. We spied more birds as we came closer, also a large whale blow seen at a distance, and a couple of feeding groups of boobies, noddies and White Terns. The reef itself is navigable for quite long stretches (there are some deep channels as well), and it was quite exciting crossing from very



deep water across the reef itself (only 15m below the boat) into the lagoon. It was the middle of the day when we went from island to island, those known to have breeding colonies of seabirds (Motu Teiku, Makaroa and Ile Manui). Motu Teiku is a small predominantly rocky islet with a number of ledges covered in what looked like ice-plant and turf. Some burrows were evident but no birds. A small shearwater was seen in the vicinity as we moved on to the next island, the very impressive-looking Makaroa. Impressive, but barren of birds. The third island Manui certainly looked the most promising with Brown Boobies, Blue-grey Noddies and White Terns all active over it. With still plenty of the day left we decided we'd go into Mangareva and get the official stuff out of the way (we were back in French territory) then come back out to the island late afternoon. This paid off, when we returned the numbers of birds flying in to the island had increased quite dramatically. First off we spied an Audubon's Shearwater on the water, we moved towards it but it flew further away. For an hour and half until well after dark we zigzagged back and forth just outside Manui: Blue-grey Noddies, White Terns, Brown Boobies, 2 Red-footed Boobies, several Pterodroma sp flew high over the island, Murphy's

Petrels, Black Noddies, then a flurry of Audubon's Shearwaters after dark (we managed to spotlight a number as they shot through). In the midst of all this activity were a couple of birds that came in low round the stern of the boat, small enough and with the right wing shape to be Polynesian Storm Petrels but weren't seen clearly to be able to confirm this. When numbers dropped away completely we headed back to Mangareva and an anchorage amongst the yachts and other vessels in the small port. On shore the locals were practicing for a dance and drum festival – all very evocative in the still conditions. Last meal together and everyone packing getting ready for a fairly early departure the next morning.

20 June: Fresh baguettes from the local bakery and coffee/tea for breakfast, then luggage out on the quay, last farewells, hugs and handshakes and we piled into the boat that would transfer us to the airfield.

Overall, an excellent trip, but there will be improvements for next year. Yes folks, we will be heading back!



Tour Participants: John Cooper, Matt Prince, Chris Collins, Tony Quinn (all UK), John Gee (US), Nicola Bacciu (UK); Kaj Kampp (Denmark). Photo taken by Chris Gaskin on the dock at Mangareva (20 June 06)



Crew of *RV Bounty Bay*: Graham Wragg, Huub, the lovely Losolini (Lo) and Ross; these guys did excellent work in making sure everyone was kept happy.



Trip organised by Chris Gaskin, **Pterodroma Pelagics**

(As you can see, already planning next year's expedition!)

CC

## SPECIES LIST:

(Please note: some birds seen on this trip warrant fuller descriptions and analyses than are presented here and we will be preparing these in due course).

**Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*)** – 2 imms (one strongly marked between 2 and 3 years; the other more advanced)

**Northern Giant Petrel (*Macronectes hallii*)** – 2 imms at Oeno (one with a gammy leg)

**Black (Parkinson's) Petrel (*Procellaria parkinsoni*)** – 1 seen east of Pitcairn Island

**Tahiti Petrel (*Pseudobulweria rostrata*)** – seen most days, at sea in vicinity of islands (Pitcairn, Henderson, Oeno and Morane). Long-winged appearance and languid flight allowed us to separate it from any other dark headed/white-bellied birds.



**White-naped (White-necked) Petrel (*Pterodroma cervicalis*)** – individuals seen on half the days while at sea; two of these birds were showing moult, one with speckled (grey) appearance on the cap (ie not black) however white-neck too strong for *externa*.

**Kermadec Petrel (*P. neglecta*)** – all three phases seen (pale, intermediate and dark); common especially near islands (Henderson, Pitcairn, Oeno and Morane). Both photos below are *neglecta*.



**Herald Petrel (*P. heraldica*)** – seen on most days, numbers increased close to islands (Henderson, Pitcairn, Oeno and Morane). Both pale and intermediate phases were seen and where we had good views could be fairly easily separated from larger *neglecta*. Never as pale-headed as pale phase of *neglecta*. White on face, chin and throat sometimes quite extensive giving these birds a collared appearance. On birds where the head was darker the line between dark and white plumage would appear blurred, not sharp as with *rostrata* or *alba*. With pale and intermediate phases of *heraldica* the white on the underwing extended from the base of primaries down the secondaries. On *neglecta* the white at the base of the primaries and primary coverts did not appear to extend down the secondaries to the same extent. Both *heraldica* and *neglecta* had white along the leading edge. Important to note we did see a number of all-dark

birds with strong patches of white on the underwing at the base of the primaries, sometimes extending down the line of the secondaries. These birds were not *neglecta* in that no white could be detected on the upperwing (this was looked for). Nor were they Henderson Petrels (see below). In other words we believe we saw birds that could be described as all-dark Herald Petrels.



**Henderson Petrel (*P. atrata*)** – seen on most days, numbers increased close to islands (Henderson and Oeno especially). We were very aware of discussion re. Henderson Petrel (i.e. do they exist?). A good number of birds we identified as *atrata* seen at sea and close to islands were dark-brown, face sometimes very dark (minimal white or pale feathers apparent under chin), underwing with no white, only a silvery shine at the base of the primaries (similar, for example, to *macroptera*, the degree of lightness depending on light conditions although some variation might have been at play here). I should add that these birds were definitely *not macroptera* which are much larger, totally different jiz, head shape and bill. They (*atrata*) closely resembled *heraldica* (and to a lesser extent *neglecta*) in head shape, however appeared to have narrower wings than either of these two species.



**Pterodroma Sp.** – Phoenix Petrels (*P. alba*) are listed for the area we visited although the situation is confusing. There are reports for them on Oeno and Ducie in 1922 with the Whitney Expedition and Oeno in 1997/1998 (Birdlife International). However Brooke (1995) could find no evidence for them on Henderson and Oeno when he did his survey. On a similar trip to ours last September *alba* was included in the birds seen. On our trip we saw a number of birds that looked like *alba*, however something wasn't quite gelling. These birds weren't as clear-cut as the descriptions and became very much the talking point of the trip keeping us all busy, especially Chris C with his digital shots and myself with sketches, trying to make sense of what we were seeing. We were fortunate to have on board recent shots of *P. alba* taken in the Phoenix Islands by a team led by NZ ornithologist Ray Pierce (they had just completed an island and marine survey of the group on board *RV Bounty Bay* a month before our trip). Treating these images as close to type we were struck by the differences with the birds we were seeing – i.e. variable amount of white on the face, chin and throat giving a '*heraldica*' appearance to an otherwise very dark head

(in some lights black) compared to Phoenix Islands birds with black head and upperbreast and a very small (triangular) patch of white on the chin which is not easy to detect in flight. The strong line of white along the leading edge of the wing (southeastern Polynesia) is in contrast to being "patchily white over short distance" (Phoenix Islands). We also noted that the pattern at the base of primaries and primary coverts was variably tinted, from dark grey/black to a silvery shine which in some lights looked almost white (but never as *white* as with *heraldica* or *neglecta* or comparable to the white along the adjacent leading edge of the same wing). It is important to note that these birds appeared black or sooty-headed, (black in some lights) with a sharp demarcation between the dark upperbreast and white belly (unlike *heraldica*). This unfortunately is not shown in Chris's photo here (which shows the areas of dark plumage diffused by strong sunlight), but these birds were distinctive and the white or pale plumage on the throat or around the face not

always readily apparent. Other features such as white belly; white undertail coverts with lateral undertail coverts showing delicate barring, were consistent with *alba* in the Phoenix Islands. In short we saw birds that could be described as approaching *alba* (as per published descriptions) yet showed affinities to *heraldica*. We dubbed them 'Herix' or 'Pheralds' depending on which way the sun was shining (joke).



**Murphy's Petrel (*P. ultima*)** – the most common Pterodroma seen on the trip. A new bird for everyone at the start of the trip and took a little while to come of terms with it, given all the other all-dark Pterodroma we were seeing the first day (i.e. *neglecta* and *atrata*, as well as discounting *macroptera*). But the all-grey cast to the plumage, the bull-headed appearance; pale-face (variable); white markings at the base of the primaries (more white than silvery as per descriptions) made them easy to pick. We got very used to these 'Murf's'. A number were seen amongst vegetation on the dunes at North Beach, Henderson Island. Pairs of birds were seen displaying over Henderson (right above the beach and through the trees backing it), Oeno and Morane. Very vocal over land.

**Black-winged Petrel (*P. nigripennis*)** – 2 birds, probable. Both going away, ID based on prominent black underwing markings and collar, white belly (7 June).

**Great-winged (Grey-faced) Petrel (*P. macroptera*)** – one possible seen, pale face no white showing underwing, jiz about right, not great views (18 June).

**Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*P. pacificus*)** – one seen east of Gambier Islands at dawn (6 June).

**Sooty Shearwater (*P. griseus*)** – one seen between Oeno and Portland Bank (8 June)

**Shearwater sp** this bird was seen at Portland Bank feeding/foraging with school of tuna and other birds (15 June). Initially we thought Audubon's (known forms of *assimilis* were discounted quickly) however nothing about this group appears to be straightforward. This bird was around *gavia*-sized; had dark-brown upperparts (as the images show and observations confirm this, ie not black); prominent white flank patches extending a long way up onto rump; longish tail; white central undertail coverts, although closer to the tail these appear 'smudgy' to dark; and pink legs with black/dark showing on feet. Also noted, this bird showed white edges to coverts (easily seen thru bins). Foraging and feeding behaviour quite similar to *assimilis* and *gavia* of northern New Zealand with little flighted dashes, peering under the water, diving to emerge and fly a short distance repeating the process over and over again.



Discussion over identification of this bird since the trip has included the diverse Audubon's group; the Manx group (incl *puffinus*, *newelli*, *gavia* and *huttoni*); and the enigmatic Rapa Island *P. assimilis myrtae* now suggested to be closely allied to *newelli* (Austin *et al* 2004).

Some comments from observers in NZ, US and UK who have seen some photos (ie outside the participants on the trip) are included here:

- On *P. assimilis myrtae* (the Rapa Little Shearwater) observers who'd seen the type specimen noted that it has blue feet, white-flank patches, long tail and very short bill. Now believed to be closely 'allied' to *newelli* (Austin *et al* 2004) makes it a very interesting bird, but not the bird under discussion here.
- *P. gavia* while similar in size has a much stronger underwing pattern, different jizz and proportions, although they do have prominent white flank patches.
- *P. huttoni* has a much darker head, are quite dusky underwing and does not have prominent white flank patches.
- Pale edging to the upperwing coverts was thought to be generally a feature of Audubon's and not of the Manx group, and Enticott and Tipling have a photo of Audubon's in their 1997 book (ill 2, page 89) showing this feature. However, one observer noted that he had seen pale tips on Manx of Tierra del Fuego.
- Three observers thought this bird a good candidate for *P. newelli*.
- Another suggested a worn Newell's might be a possibility (although he leaned towards Audubon's).
- Impressions of *P. newelli* is that it is always of a blacker, more contrasty bird, with sharp demarcation between the black and white on the sides of the face and cleaner breast and neck sides.
- One observer noted: 'Extensive white flank patches would be unusual for Manx (and perhaps for Audubon's, though regular for Newell's).'
- With Audubon's, undertail coverts are dark in many subspecies as noted in the section on *Geographic Variation* in HANZAB, but not with South Pacific subspecies. HANZAB pl 49.1 shows *P. i. dichrous* with central undertail coverts largely white.
- In a fairly brief but wide-ranging discussion to date, most observers would see this bird within the Audubon's group. However, it is not easy to be conclusive.

Two or three new books on the horizon should shed light on these small shearwaters, which are, as one observer put it, "a deep and murky lot." Paul Scofield and Derek Onley's book on identification of seabirds will most likely be the first off the rank and will be a welcome addition to the literature. I hope soon, I have another trip to this area in September. My thanks to those who have contributed to the discussion to date; further comment is always welcome and can be sent to me at [info@nzseabirds.com](mailto:info@nzseabirds.com)



**Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus iherminieri*)** – several seen in Mangareva Lagoon (Gambier Islands), most seen using spotlight (19 June). The small shearwaters known to be breeding on Manui and Motu Teiku are *P. i. dichrous* and *P. nativitatis*. One bird seen sitting on the water in the late afternoon was photographed when it took off. While Chris C's photos are not great in this case (they are blurry and just rear-end views) they do show a bird with dark undertail coverts. This contrasts strongly with the shearwater with predominantly white undertail coverts seen at Portland Bank about 80kms away a few days earlier.

**Christmas Shearwater (*P. nativitatis*)** – one probable, seen at dusk, small dark shearwater (19 June)

***Fregetta* sp** – seen on three separate days and six different occasions east and west of Pitcairn and south of Gambier Islands. Three of these birds were positively identified as White-bellied Storm Petrels (see below)

**White-bellied Storm Petrel (*Fregetta grallaria*)** – three positively identified (two east of the Pitcairn, the other to the west of the same island); Accepting that white-bellied forms of ***tropica*** exist in numbers, and could be present in these waters, ***grallaria*** could really only be separated by their stocky appearance – they have relatively short legs/feet compared to ***F. tropica*** – and white bellies. White on underwing appears more extensive on ***grallaria*** being more simply patterned.

**Polynesian (White-throated) Storm Petrel (*Nesofregetta fuliginosa*)** – only one seen to the east of Pitcairn (12 June), this one quite grey across the upper surfaces. Came bounding towards us across the waves, quite an extraordinary bird. Two birds seen in almost dark conditions off Ile Manui (Gambier islands), zipping along the side of the boat and across the wake when we were seeing Audubon's Shearwaters coming through, could have been these birds (wing-shape and size appeared ok).

**Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*)** – seen mostly in the vicinity or over most islands, in particular Pitcairn, Henderson, Oeno and Morane. Interestingly, we saw mostly females and juvs/immatures for most of the trip. Two males were seen at Pitcairn. By contrast at Morane we could see males on nests amongst the lower trees displaying their red gular pouches.



**Red-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*)** – seen at sea and in the vicinity of islands (Gambier Islands, Pitcairn, Henderson, Oeno, Morane). One found dead in the water at Oeno. I also found a fledgling amongst the trees behind the beach (near the base of the cliffs) with a very large crab beside it. When I was walking that way again it had gone. Later, as we were getting ready to leave what could have been this same bird came down the beach and waddled into the sea whereupon it started to wash itself. I think we had all decided it was on a suicide mission, but after a while it was obvious it was perfectly happy. With all the fun and games of

getting everyone out through the reef and back to the boat we forgot to check on it and see whether it made its way back up the beach.

**White-tailed Tropicbird (*P. lepturus*)** – seen at Mangareva (Gambier islands) and Pitcairn.

**Red-footed Booby (*S. sula*)** – very common; seen at sea and sometimes well away from islands. Breeding on Henderson, Oeno and Morane. We saw two birds in Mangareva Lagoon, Gambier Islands.



**Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)** – common, seen at sea, sometimes well away from islands. Also close to Henderson, Oeno and Morane where they are breeding.

**Brown Booby (*S. leucogaster*)** – one seen at Henderson, and good numbers breeding on Ile Manui in the Gambier Islands. Seen feeding/foraging at sea outside lagoon

**Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*)** – both phases seen; seen on Henderson and Morane.

**Henderson Island Crake (*Porzana atra*)** – a real 'cracker' of a bird. Great reward after all the drama of getting ashore. Three of us took our Henderson Crake T-shirts (which we bought at



Pitcairn) onto Henderson and put them for an obligatory photo on the beach. Great little birds, with their short wings. Very aggressive too, flicking leaves and litter out of the way in their search for food.

**Bristle-thighed Curlew (*Numenius tahitiensis*)** – curious and delightful. There was a group of up to 30 on Henderson. On the beach birds would approach, one especially with the whole team lined up (the noise of cameras was deafening) which just kept walking towards us. Chris C has some great shots right down to the 'bristle-thighs'. Birds would move around in group along the beach, and up onto pinnacles of the cliff tops.

**Tuamotu Sandpiper (*Prosobonia cancellata*)** – we saw a good number of these on Morane. With strong winds they would flutter above the tree tops, singly, in pairs and in small loose groups. These birds appeared quite dark.

**Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus parasiticus*)** – seen on all islands (up to five on Henderson) including Mangareva around the village

**Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*)** – only seen at Hao on the airfield during the stopover on the flight between Papeete and Mangareva (6 June)

**South Polar Skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*)** – one seen northeast of Pitcairn (10 June)

**White Tern (*Gygis alba*)** – common; both at sea, particularly close to islands

**Blue-grey Noddy (*Procelsterna cerulea*)** – on Pitcairn, Henderson, Morane and Ile Manui (Gambier Islands). These birds have plumage and colouration that varies hugely with light conditions from almost white to a soft grey with white head to grey that is sometimes washed with blue from the sea reflected upwards. In some cases they can also be quite dark and two phases are recognised. Some in the group were happy go with the split of these birds (two species *P. albigitta* and *P. cerulea*), as birds fitting the descriptions were certainly seen, but I'd prefer to stay with a single highly variable species.

**Crested Tern (*Sterna bergii*)** – seen at Henderson, Morane and Mangareva Lagoon Gambier islands)

**Sooty Tern (*S. fuscata*)** – seen at all islands, and at Portland Bank, although not in large numbers.

**Black Noddy (*Anous minutus*)** – seen at all islands, generally in small groups or individuals as at Henderson, Oeno and Morane

**Brown Noddy (*A. stolidus*)** – common close to islands and Portland Bank; big feeding flock a few kms east of Pitcairn



**Henderson Island Fruit Dove (*Ptilinopus insularis*)** – seen at North Beach on Henderson; Graham and I saw an adult in forest on the plateau beyond the cliff-tops; the group had great views of an adult in forest behind the beach after it was flushed from the ground as we moved through ferns and fallen pandanus leaves; I also flushed a juvenile (no red cap) which flew to a branch just above me.

**Long-tailed Cuckoo (Koel) (*Eudynamis taitensis*)** – one seen on Morane (17 June)

**Henderson Island (Stephen's) Lorikeet (*Vini stephni*)** – a number seen at North Beach, Henderson Island. First group seen on northeastern headland flying along cliff-tops over low vegetation; also feeding on coconut flowers, or flying through tops of forest and coconut trees

**Henderson Island Reed-warbler (*Acrocephalus taiti*)** – very active plain brown, dusky-looking bird (lighter on the belly) amongst all types of vegetation



**Pitcairn Island Reed-warbler (*A. vaughani*)** – quite variable; from brown plain-looking birds through a piebald phase (mix of brown and white secondaries, and white outer tail feathers) to birds that had all-white/cream tails, white on the wings and pale yellow bellies. Very vocal and active in all-types of vegetation. Locals have tales of them eating bananas and feeding on nectar. John's comments: "I enjoyed the Pitcairn Reed Warblers, they acted like fantails, and were almost and numerous as the New Zealand Fantails."

Birds seen on Tahiti: Grey-green fruit-dove (*Ptilinopus purpuratus*); Tahiti Swiftlet (*Aerodramus leucophaeus*); Tahiti Kingfisher (*Halycon venerata*); Pacific Swallow (*Hirundo tahitica*); Tahiti Monarch (Flycatcher) (*Pomarea nigra*); Tahiti Reed-warbler (*Acrocephalus caffra*) – both phases; Pacific Harrier (*Circus approximans*); Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*); Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*); Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*); Common Waxbill (*Estrilda astrilda*); Chestnut-breasted Mannikin (*Lonchura castaneothorax*); Zebra Dove (*Geopelia striata*); Rock Dove (*Columba livea*); plus White Tern; White-tailed Tropicbird; Lesser Frigatebird; Crested Tern; and Brown Booby



Our thanks to Ann Gouni, the biologist with MANU (French Polynesia) and Thierry Zysman for arranging the excellent visit to the Papahue Reserve for the Tahiti Monarch and Tahiti Swiftlets.



MANU are producing a new bird book for French Polynesia and Chris C was able to help out with some images at the end of our trip. Thierry is the publisher: Tethys Publications, Tahiti.

Photos credited CC by Chris Collins (chris at birdsandwildlife dot com)  
 Minke whale underwater by Huub van Buchen, Pacific Expeditions  
 All others by Chris Gaskin

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