

PELAGIC BIRDWATCHING

South-East Asia's final frontier?

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Introduction

All around the world, pelagic birdwatching is revolutionising our knowledge of the world's seabirds and their distribution. In the Asia Pacific Region, whilst the ferries of Japan have long been popular with birders and pelagic trips from Australia have run for many years, up until recently the offshore waters of South and South-East Asia were almost completely neglected. The intention of this brief article is to summarise recent growing interest in pelagic birding in South-East Asia and hopefully to encourage and challenge others in the region to take to the water—there is much still to be discovered beyond the sight of land at the region's ornithological final frontier.

While there was some early interest in pelagic birdwatching in the region in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Cadée 1987, de Silva 1989, van den Berg *et al.* 1991, de Korte & Silvius 1994, Ollington & Loh 1996) this never developed, and most of our current knowledge of seabirds in the region comes from occasional visits to seabird breeding islands (e.g. Croxall *et al.* 1991, Poole 1994, de Jong 2011), scattered opportunistic ship-board observations, particularly from cetacean watching boats (e.g. de Silva Wijeyeratne 2010), and inter-island ferries—especially in Indonesia (e.g. Lansley *et al.* 2011).

Between 2008 and 2010 the authors separately started organising trips out to sea specifically to look for seabirds. The initial results have been exciting.

Malaysia

In April 2008 Tan Choo Eng and DB made the first exploratory foray on board a working anchovy boat, off the Kedah coast in the north of Peninsular Malaysia to 'see what was out there'. Had the day been as fruitless as many subsequent trips, the pelagic adventures might well have ended there and then, but fortunately the sightings of Aleutian Tern *Sterna aleutica*, Pomarine *Stercorarius pomarinus* and Long-tailed Skua *S. longicaudus*, all considered national vagrants at that time, were enough to awaken Malaysian birders to the potential of pelagic birding.

Since then, over 25 day trips at all times of the year have been made from the same locality, resulting in some exciting discoveries. Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*, previously unrecorded from Malaysia, have been found to

occur in the northern Straits of Malacca in small numbers from April to June (Bakewell & Tan 2010). A significant passage of skuas occurs during the same period, with Long-tailed being the most abundant, followed by Pomarine and Parasitic *S. parasiticus* (the latter being the rarest and also the last of the three species to migrate).

Notable concentrations of Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* occur during the months of December to February, with over 5,000 of the former and 6,000 of the latter being the maxima to date. This suggests that the seas off the Kedah coast are an important wintering area for these species. Bridled Tern *S. anaethetus* occurs as a migrant in considerable numbers from April to June and September to November, with peaks of 600 in May and 500 in September, but single-figure counts from December to February indicate that they are wintering elsewhere. Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*, Roseate *Sterna dougallii*, Aleutian and Sooty Terns *S. fuscata* and Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* have been found to be scarce migrants, and the sporadic appearance of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* suggests dispersal of immatures, possibly from Pulau Perak some 200 km to the south, where the species formerly bred and may still do so.

Indonesia

After trawling through the historical records, and getting brief enticing views of shearwaters and petrels from inter-island ferries, NB and a small group of local birders decided to put to sea from Java in a chartered sport-fishing boat in September 2009 to see what could be found. The chosen first destination was the Sunda Straits, lying between Java and Sumatra, and in particular the southern end of the straits where the sea floor drops steeply away to the Java Trench; the group returned in July 2010 and September 2011 to the same general area.

Each trip has been different, but all have been rewarding. Every trip has recorded Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas*, Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Swinhoe's Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*, Aleutian Tern, Brown Booby and Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi*, while two out of three trips have also recorded Bulwer's Petrel and Matsudaira's Storm Petrel *O. matsudairae* and single trips have

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Plate 1. Immature Aleutian Tern *Sterna aleutica*, Singapore Strait, 17 September 2011.



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Plate 4. Immature Parasitic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Tanjung Dawai, 3 June 2010.

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Plate 2. Immature Long-tailed Skua, *Stercorarius longicaudus*, Tanjung Dawai, 4 May 2011.

Plate 3. Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*, Tanjung Dawai, 4 May 2011.



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Plate 5. Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, Tanjung Dawai, 3 June 2010.

Plate 6. Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*, Tanjung Dawai, 16 June 2011.

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provided excellent encounters with Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Long-tailed Skua and Lesser *Anous tenuirostris* and Black Noddy *A. minutus*.

Singapore

In October 2010 CP and a group of local birders chartered a sport-fishing/pleasure boat and travelled east into international waters along the Singapore Strait between Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia searching primarily for Swinhoe's Storm Petrel. The success of this foray generated such interest that these surveys have subsequently continued every month as part of the Singapore National Parks Board Comprehensive Marine Biodiversity Survey.

The trips have confirmed that these waters are a key passage area for migrating Swinhoe's Storm Petrel—with over 500 being recorded in September 2011—and Aleutian Tern, which appears commoner

in the Singapore Strait than Common Tern. In addition there have been odd records of summering Swinhoe's Storm Petrel and Aleutian Tern. Pomarine, Parasitic, and Long-tailed Skua have been recorded either during passage or in winter (Foley 2011), with the first and last of these probably being the first documented records for Singapore. Short-tailed Shearwater—another new species for Singapore—has been confirmed moving east in May, and significant numbers of Bridled Tern have been recorded migrating west in spring and east in autumn.

Commentary

The Singaporean and Indonesian data are both currently being written up for publication. The Malaysian data are available online at <http://www.worldbirds.org> under 'Malaysia' and the



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Plate 7. Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Tanjung Dawai, 15 June 2011.

Plate 8. Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*, Tanjung Dawai, 4 May 2011.



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Plate 9. Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*, Tanjung Sawai, 8 June 2011.

Plate 10. Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*, Tanjung Dawai, 3 June 2010.



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Plate 11. Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis*, north Pacific, 10 June 2003. (Image added by editors)

Plate 12. First-winter intermediate morph Parasitic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* interacting with Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*, Singapore Strait, 15 January 2011.



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location name ‘at sea, off Tanjung Dawai, Kedah’. In Indonesia the new interest in seabirds has inspired the creation of a local group *Burung Laut Indonesia* dedicated to their cause—for more information about this group visit <http://burung-nusantara.org/network/burung-laut-indonesia>. Finally, to encourage interest and regional information exchange, we have set up an email list-serve; to join simply send an email to indo-pacific-seabirds-subscribe@yahoogroups.co.uk.

It is now clear that the Singapore Strait at certain times of year is probably one of the most reliable and easiest places to see Swinhoe’s Storm Petrel and Aleutian Tern. Likewise a short boat trip into the Jakarta Bay can provide a good chance of Swinhoe’s Storm Petrel and Aleutian Tern at the right season, and almost guaranteed close encounters with Christmas Island Frigatebird. In both these places, with enough interest, regular charters could be arranged.

An important and positive aspect of the rise in interest in pelagic birding in Malaysia is that it has largely been made possible by the willingness of commercial fishing fleet operators to take birders on board (at no cost). This has meant that birders have benefited from the local knowledge of fishermen regarding the birds they usually see at

Plate 13. Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus* with Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*, Singapore Strait, 13 November 2010.



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Plate 14. Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*, Singapore Strait, 19 March 2011.

different times of year, and in turn have been able to help increase appreciation of seabirds by training interested crew members to differentiate species groups. This has had two positive effects: firstly, crew members call whenever they see something they know is unusual, and secondly, the fishing fleet has stopped recreational killing of shearwaters, formerly an annual pastime, after DB and TCE distributed posters explaining the amazing migratory journeys of these birds.

Where next?

Almost anywhere in the region could hold surprises and even the easily accessible shallow coastal shelf of the Gulf of Thailand is little known. For example, about ten years ago Pete Davidson, as part of a team carrying out cetacean surveys on a local fishing boat off the southern coast of Cambodia in March and April 2001, recorded large numbers of three species of skua (176 birds in all), Aleutian Tern, Brown Noddy and Christmas Island Frigatebird. All were previously unknown, or unknown in such numbers, from the northern Gulf (Davidson 2001).

Plate 15. Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus*, southern waters of Po Toi Island, Hong Kong, 5 April 2008.



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A decade later this area is still largely unvisited.

Similarly, almost any part of Indonesia is likely to be good for seabirds, as the recent record of Chinese Crested Tern *Sterna bernsteini* demonstrates (Robson 2011). Visits to the seas south of the Lesser Sundas would surely pay dividends; this area lies near the Ashmore Reef where many interesting Australian seabird records originate (Western Australia Recent Bird Sightings 2011, Mike Carter pers. comm.). The deeper water south of the Lombok Strait between Bali and Lombok is well worth investigation as large movements of Streaked Shearwater have been seen from land here in January (NB pers. obs.). The remote Banda Sea where Indonesia's key remaining seabird colonies lie should also be rewarding, holding colonies of Masked *Sula dactylatra*, Red-footed *S. sula* and Brown Booby (de Korte & Silvius 1994; de Jong 2011) as well as the intriguing prospect of an undiscovered colony of Abbott's Booby *Papasula abbotti* (Cadée 1987, van Balen 1996).

But the bigger prizes are around the two unexplored deep trenches and deep waters that lie not far from Java, Sumatra, western Myanmar, Halmahera and the Philippines. The first of these is the 2,600 km Sunda Trench which stretches from the island of Sumba, along the southern coast of Java and western Sumatra north through the Indian Ocean towards the western coast of Myanmar. Indonesia's only records of Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau* and Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* were found in this area off the western islands of Sumatra (van den Berg *et al.* 1991). Perhaps most exciting is the potential, and accessibility, of the Philippine Trench, one of the world's deepest, that stretches, often close inshore, from Halmahera north to Luzon. Tourism companies in the Visayas advertise sport-fishing boat charters to these areas for big game fishing, so why not for birders? And what may be out there? The list of possibilities could include: Tahiti Petrel *P. rostrata*, White-necked Petrel *P. cervicalis*, Herald Petrel *P. heraldica*, Hawaiian

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Plate 16. Swinhoe's Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*, Singapore Strait, 2 October 2010.

Plate 17. Aleutian Tern *Sterna aleutica* Singapore Strait, 17 September 2011.

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Petrel *P. sandwichensis*, Kermadec Petrel *P. neglecta*, Beck's Petrel *Pseudobulweria becki*, Short-tailed Albatross *Diomedea albatrus*, Black-footed Albatross *D. nigripes* and Laysan Albatross *D. immutabilis*.

Perhaps you are up to the challenge and want to be the first to find out?

Acknowledgements

DB wishes to thank Heng Soon Huat, the owner of the Kedah coast anchovy boat fleet, for giving him permission to board the boats, and in particular, Abang Anwar and the crew for making him welcome on board. NB would like to thank the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society and the Pacific Seabird Group for their generous financial support of Indonesian pelagic surveys. CP wishes to thank the National Parks Board of Singapore, and particularly Lena Chan, Geoffrey Davison, Linda Goh and Jonathan Ngiam, for their support of the Singapore surveys.

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