

A TASMAN SEA-BIRD LOG

By R. B. SIBSON

S.S. Arcadia (30,000 tons) sailed from Auckland in the late afternoon of 5/2/64 and passed Sydney Heads early on the morning of February 8th, having completed the journey at an average speed of about 21 knots. The weather generally was fine, calm and sunny till the last morning when a fresh gale was blowing, accompanied by some drizzle. For much of the crossing, there was a light easterly swell. Conditions for bird-watching were excellent. I was often aided by my wife and son; and was able to compare notes with Mr. D. J. Slinn.

This log seemed worthy of publication because I was fortunate in being able to watch in mid-ocean a number of sea-birds which, though they are on the New Zealand list, are seldom reported from our coastal waters. It is hoped that these observations will prove of use to other loggers of sea-birds who may be crossing the northern Tasman in summer.

For the sake of completeness and also to show how common species at either end, e.g. Fluttering Shearwaters (*P. gavia*) in the Hauraki Gulf and Crested Terns (*S. bergii*) in Sydney Harbour, may be missed or fail to appear, no species seen, however trivial, has been omitted.

5/2/64. 1700 hrs. Sailed from Auckland. In the Waitemata the usual Red-billed Gulls (*L. scopulinus*) including some mottled young of the season; also Black-backed Gulls (*L. dominicanus*); neither species in big numbers. Two White-fronted Terns (*S. striata*) and one Big Pied Shag (*P. varius*).

Rangitoto. Some Black-backs still over breeding colony. Near the beacon, 1 Arctic Skua, dark breasted (*S. parasiticus*) and a few White-fronted Terns.

W. of Rakino, a single adult Gannet (*S. serrator*) and at 1825 hrs., the first Buller's Shearwater (*P. bulleri*) flying parallel, its underwing lit up by the westering sun. In summer it is not unusual to pick up the first Buller's Shearwaters just beyond Rangitoto.

A few Black-backs, ranging rather wide for them, evidently homing from a great gathering of Gannets, 500-1000. We have passed well outside Tiri and are south-east of Kawau I. Buller's Shearwaters are now numerous and there are some Flesh-footed (*P. carneipes*).

1840 hrs. Some shearwaters of both species and also occasional Gannets are using Arcadia's slip-stream. I can look right down on them.

1900 hrs. Little Barrier to starboard. Buller's and Flesh-footed Shearwaters now plentiful. Though the light is failing, the pale bill of *carneipes* shows quite clearly. No smaller petrels seen, nor a single brown juvenile Gannet among the hundreds or adults through which we have passed.

6/2/64. 0630 hrs. An empty seascape, relieved by a single distant gadfly petrel, flashing white underneath, possibly a Black-winged Petrel based on the Three King's Islands, which are over the north-east horizon.

0810 hrs. One brown immature Wandering Albatross (*D. exulans*) over the wake.

Rest of morning, no birds.

Noon. 34°16'S. 168°37'E. Our course is 272°, i.e. just north of due west.

1225 hrs. One big dark petrel; (*P. macroptera*) suspected.

1320 hrs. We have run into an assemblage of Black-winged Petrels (*P. nigripennis*), a robust gadfly petrel whose under-wing, edged with solid black fore and aft, distinguishes it at once from *cooki* (Notornis VI, 20). These petrels are superb fliers, often soaring in to-day's fresh south-easterly breeze up to more than 100 ft. Pairs indulge in follow-the-leader chases and a third bird may join in. It is often easy to count up to ten in sight at once; some are over the wake; others are beside us on the southern side, and thus lit up by the sun; others are close under the bows. Black-winged Petrels seem to be classable under the category of ship-followers. I have been able to find only one big dark petrel, presumably *macroptera*, among them.

1415 hrs. Still several *nigripennis* with us.

1515-1530 hrs. Several *nigripennis* very much in view.

1615-1630 hrs. As many *nigripennis* as ever, perhaps more. Also one white Wanderer (*D. exulans*) over the wake, dwarfing the *nigripennis* and one gannet which looked 'wrong' and proved to be a Blue-faced or Masked Gannet (*S. dactyatra*). For a vital minute or two it flew beside us, going west, steadily overtaking Arcadia's 21 knots; face faintly bluish; crown and nape not golden; wings with broad dark trailing edge; dark tail. Earlier it was criss-crossing the wake with the single white *exulans*.

1725 hrs. I have never seen gadfly petrels at sea soaring as these *nigripennis* do, up to the level of the upper structure of this large liner. Is this one of the reasons why they crash on board ships more often than other petrels? The flying in pairs is most marked. Are these courtship flights of young adults? As I write I can see a couple cavorting at about 200 ft., using if need be, against the wind a flapping flight. There are still plenty about. Sometimes there must have been a few dozen over the wake.

1900 hrs. No *exulans* visible; but *nigripennis* all around us.

7/2/64. 0540 hrs. A single *macroptera* across the bows. One small gadfly petrel, apparently not *nigripennis*, flashing white underneath. Two whales which looked like Sperms.

0600 hrs. A tantalizing 'swirl' of about twenty gadfly petrels with a gleaming White Tern (*G. alba*) and a Sooty Tern (*S. fuscata*) and some big brownish tubenoses, one dirty white on belly, passed rather distantly and was soon left behind. Light not bright; but it was useless to look astern towards the sunrise. An easterly swell is still pushing us. The Sooty Tern was buoyant and angular, with long tail streamers. It was flying well above the tubenoses which were probably Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (*P. pacificus*) and was seen to peel off in a steep turn and dive.

0615 hrs. One Gray-faced Petrel.

0633 hrs. A small gadfly petrel quite well seen close under the bows; smaller than *nigripennis*; an inverted W showing dark across upper surface; dark crown and nape, underwing not edged with black. *Pt. leucoptera* seems a fair guess. Several pale blue flying fish, paler and smaller than those (*Cypselurus melanocercus*) of the Hauraki Gulf and Bay of Plenty.

0805 hrs. One *macroptera* and one *leucoptera*.

0855 hrs. One *macroptera*.

0904 hrs. One *macroptera*. The grey face on these was easily seen.

0904-0925 hrs. Several *leucoptera* passing across bows from north to south.

0925 hrs. Two big brownish shearwaters fairly close seemed to be Wedge-tailed (*P. pacificus*).

0930 hrs. More *leucoptera*. None of the gadfly petrels seen closely this morning has been *nigripennis*; but odd ones in the distance have aroused suspicions.

0936 hrs. Three Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. The bill can look bluish. One passed close, revealing considerable contrasts in the pattern of browns on its upper surface.

0950 hrs. Some hundreds of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters 'Swirling' with a few Sooty Terns overhead, whence presumably the shrill chattering. A young Sooty Tern with smudgy belly and short-forked tail flew close. But when one is travelling at 20 knots, these concentrations of pelagic birds pass all too quickly and their composition is not easily diagnosed.

1000-1020 hrs. Several *leucoptera*.

1115 hrs. Nil.

1145 hrs. Nil.

Noon. 34°07'S. 158°34'E.

1400 hrs. A single brown gull-like bird with a 'flapping' flight high over the wake rather far astern. Possibly a Pomarine Skua (*S. pomarinus*) intent on galley-scrap.

1745 hrs. Two dark petrels flying together, *macroptera* or *carneipes* size.

1900 hrs. Nil. What a contrast with the animated scene of this time yesterday.

8/2/64. 0530 hrs. Sea rough; some drizzle. Australian coast in sight. No birds astern.

0600 hrs. Silver Gulls (*L. novaehollandiae*) streaming out from Port Jackson to meet us.

Later, as we neared the harbour bridge, a Welcome Swallow (*H. neoxena*) flew over. Parties of European Starlings (*S. vulgaris*) and a Peewee (*Crallina cyanoleuca*) could be seen feeding on lawns. By now Silver Gulls were in hundreds. But the commonest birds flying across the harbour were the inevitable feral Rock Doves (*C. livia*).