

WildWings Limosa

WESTERN PACIFIC ODYSSEY:

NEW ZEALAND TO JAPAN

TRIP REPORT



New Zealand Storm Petrel is critically endangered but numbers have certainly increased in recent years © Mark Newsome

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21 March – 18 April 2024

WildWings / Limosa Leader: Derek Barber

Trip Report: Derek Barber with special thanks to Mark Newsome and Tracey Barber for use of their photos

Introduction

This was to be another remarkable WPO making the full voyage from New Zealand to Japan, visiting some of the remotest and difficult to access areas in the world. Although we experienced some abnormal weather, the expedition was a huge success with many rare and poorly known birds being seen. There were plenty of “almost mythical” seabirds including Beck’s Petrel, Heinroth’s Shearwater and Short-tailed Albatross. With a supporting cast of Tristram’s Storm Petrel, Matsudaira’s Storm Petrel, New Zealand Storm Petrel, Collared Petrel, Magnificent Petrel, Bonin Petrel and Japanese Murrelet, the seabird list was exceptional. Once again, there were some extremely noteworthy cetacean records, with the highlights being good views of a pod of False Killer Whales, including mothers and calves, and a single Omura’s Whale. We also had excellent views of a Pygmy Sperm Whale, and the number of breaching Humpback Whales was impressive.

The expedition was, however, not just about seabirds and cetaceans and, during the course of the voyage, all of our major planned landings were achieved. These started with a successful visit to Norfolk Island (where all the extant endemics were seen) followed by some great birding on New Caledonia. Here our major target was the Kagu, and this was seen exceptionally well thanks to the assistance of the Senior Ranger. On our two days on New Caledonia, we also saw a single Crow Honeyeater, as well as Cloven-feathered Dove, New Caledonian Thicketbird, New Caledonian Goshawk, Horned and New Caledonian Parakeets, New Caledonian Crow and Red-throated Parrotfinch.

After three days at sea, we arrived in the Solomon Islands where we enjoyed five consecutive days of landings visiting Santa Ana, Makira, Guadalcanal, Tetepare and Kolombangara. Here, we encountered a great range of Solomon endemics, and other localised species including Sanford’s Sea-eagle, Woodford’s Rail, Ultramarine Kingfisher, Solomons Cockatoo, White-capped Monarch, Cockerell’s Fantail, Kolombangara Monarch, Makira Flycatcher and Midget Flowerpecker. The biggest surprise, however, was excellent views of a perched Crested Cuckoo-Dove, which was a new bird for most of the Expedition Team. One of the highlights of this part of the trip are the welcomes we had from the islanders, an experience that will live long in the memory.

The expedition then moved on to Chuuk, Micronesia where the first afternoon was spent on Weno. The following morning, some of the group made the long zodiac ride to Tol South, whilst others either remained on the main island of Weno or visited Dublon which was a new island for the WPO. For those who made the tough climb to the higher elevations of Tol South, the reward was the highly localised Chuuk Monarch and Teardrop White-eye, whilst Weno provided other specialities including Blue-faced Parrotfinch, White fronted Ground-Dove, Purple-capped Fruit Dove and Micronesian Myzomela. Those that visited Dublon also connected with Chuuk Monarch and the Parrotfinch.

We successfully landed on the Japanese island of Chichi-jima where we managed to see Japanese Bush Warbler and Black (Japanese) Wood Pigeon. Next was one of the most incredible experiences of our expedition, as we made a close approach to Torishima, where we saw several hundred Short-tailed Albatross in three of their colonies. We then landed on Miyake-jima where we found Izu Thrush, Izu Robin, Ijima's Leaf Warbler and Owston's Tit amongst others, before successfully locating a number of Japanese Murrelets on our final evening.

We found *Heritage Adventurer* to be an incredibly well-equipped ship and the standard of food and drink is exceptional, as was the service of the crew. The Heritage Expedition Team kept us entertained with talks and presentations throughout the cruise. The Heritage Team were fantastic throughout the whole trip and we enjoyed their company immensely. The Captain and crew did an incredible job too, we managed all the major planned landings, and that says a lot about their sailing skills. Special mention goes to the landings in Japan, with the Captain having to reverse the ship into the small harbour on Chichi-jima, and finding an alternative landing site on Miyake-jima as it was not possible to use the original one due to the sea state. The zodiac pilots also need special acknowledgement as they got us safely to places in some challenging conditions.

We hope you will agree that this was a highly memorable voyage and hopefully these notes and the attached systematic list will bring back many happy memories to those who joined us.

Derek Barber

Trip Diary

Day 1 - Thursday 21st March – Auckland, New Zealand

We arrived late afternoon on the quay at Auckland Harbour where we dropped off our bags, met our fellow passengers and boarded *Heritage Adventurer* which would be our home for the next four weeks. We had a ship introduction and a bit of time to orientate ourselves before the mandatory zodiac and lifeboat drill. It was then time for the first of our very tasty dinners before retiring to our rooms in anticipation of the adventure ahead.

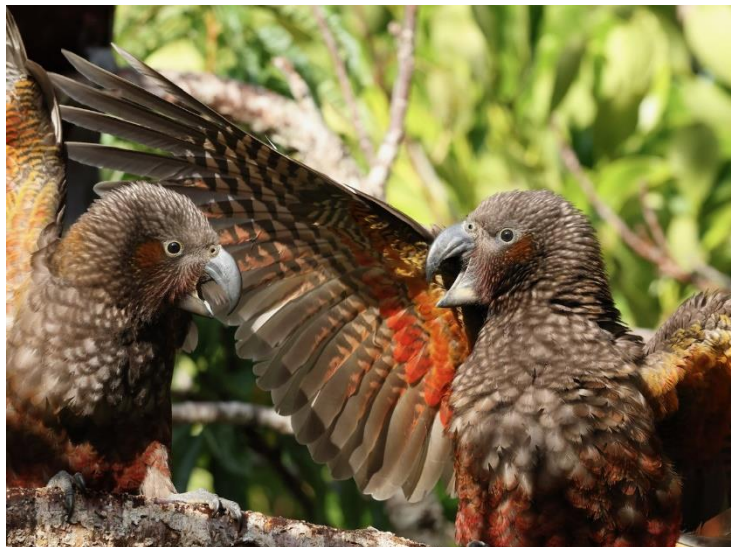
Day 2 - Friday 22nd March – Great Barrier Island, Mokohinau Islands and Haruaki Gulf, NZ

06:00: 36°10'S 175°15'E 18:00: 35°31'S 175°02'E

Overnight we had repositioned and were just off Great Barrier Island at dawn. After breakfast, we did a bit of birding from the monkey deck where we scoped three Little Penguins, a fly over Kaka and a couple of Variable Oystercatchers. We then headed off in the zodiacs, landing on a nearby jetty and enjoyed a walk on the island.

Kakas © Mark Newsome

Fabulous views of a number of Kaka at close range was an undoubted highlight but we also connected with New Zealand Fantail, New Zealand Pigeon, Silvereye and Tui. Along the main track, a small pool held a female Brown Teal with five fluffy ducklings. Brown Teal is a conservation success story in New Zealand, with the species bouncing back from just 200 birds at the back end of the last century to over 2,000 individuals in recent years.



A Buff-banded Rail showed exceptionally well and on the forest trail we were privileged to be shown a fairly well grown Black Petrel chick in its burrow.

Buff-banded Rail © Mark Newsome

Back on the ship, we sailed to the Mokohinau Islands, picking up lots of seabirds on the way including hundreds of Flesh-footed Shearwaters and Common Diving-Petrels, along with a scattering of Fluttering Shearwaters, Buller's Shearwaters and Cook's Petrels. Sailing on past

the islands and into the Hauraki Gulf, the onboard team started an oil drip off the stern and, after an hour or so, the main container of 'chum' was dropped overboard creating a large slick off the back of the ship.

This soon started to attract seabirds and, to our delight, they were mainly our target species, the much sought after and recently rediscovered New Zealand Storm Petrel. In the end, we had no fewer than 20 NZ Stormies on the slick plus one Fairy Prion and a single Black Petrel. At around the same time, we also had a couple of Wilson's Storm Petrels and one White-faced Storm Petrel.

We left the slick as it started to break up and the birds lost interest and continued on our journey towards the Bay of Islands. Buller's Shearwater numbers continued to rise and a couple more Fairy Prions were seen. Cook's Petrels were also on the increase. Finally, we had a couple of Gibson's Albatrosses and a single Campbell Albatross to finish the day.



New Zealand Storm Petrel was believed extinct until it was rediscovered in 2003 and since then the numbers in the Hauraki Gulf have increased significantly © Mark Newsome

Day 3 - Saturday 23rd March – Urupukapuka Island, Bay of Islands, New Zealand

06:00: 35°13'S 174°08'E 18:00: 34°38'S 169°53'E

An early breakfast was followed by a landing, via zodiac, at the small town of Russell, and then on to Urupukapuka Island via the ferry. The forest trails provided us with views of North Island Saddleback, Red-fronted Parakeet, Whitehead, Tui and Buff-banded Rail (which seemed to be everywhere). Around the beaches, there were many Variable Oystercatchers and we had great views of a good number of New Zealand Dotterels, some of which were still showing signs of post-breeding plumage. Some of the group got lucky with New Zealand Pipit and North Island Robin but most connected with Tomtit. There were about three Moreporks available at various locations throughout the morning, with one showing exceptionally well behind the campground.

It had been quite wet with heavy downpours during most of the morning but thankfully the sun appeared late morning and some of us took the opportunity to visit the town of Russell before heading back to the ship on the zodiacs and then lunch onboard.

Tomtit © Mark Newsome

The afternoon session on deck, looking for seabirds as we headed north, proved successful with good numbers of Buller's Shearwaters, a few Flesh-footed Shearwaters and over 20 Fluttering Shearwaters. Grey-faced Petrel was fairly common as we headed into deeper water and away from New Zealand. Gadfly petrels also started to swing by with Cook's Petrel dominating. We had a couple of Black-winged Petrels and one White-necked Petrel. Unfortunately, Pycroft's Petrel, which is not easily separated from Cook's in the field, evaded us.



Grey-faced Petrels © Mark Newsome

A fishing boat had a lot of birds around it and through scopes both Wandering and White-capped Albatrosses were noted. Later we had excellent views of a female Antipodean Albatross as she effortlessly cruised past the ship. A Southern Royal Albatross was found later in the day along with a distant Black-browed/Campbell Albatross type. In addition there was a very brief White-faced Storm Petrel.

This evening we had dinner together as a group before attending the bird log and a short presentation by Chris on the seabirds we would likely encounter over the next few days.

Day 4 - Sunday 24th March – At Sea (heading north to Norfolk Island, Australia)

06:00: 32°46'S 171°41'E 18:00: 31°01'S 173°41'E

Today was a sea day between New Zealand and Norfolk Island, crossing into Australian waters in the early afternoon. Thankfully, we dodged the heavy rain showers and experienced pretty good weather throughout the day. The sea state also settled from a slight swell to calm by the afternoon.

During the morning session we managed at least three Kermadec Petrels, numerous Black-winged Petrels, plenty of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and a couple of Arctic Skuas. We also had great looks at White-necked Petrel, more Grey-faced Petrels and a couple of Red-tailed Tropicbirds.



Black-winged Petrel © Mark Newsome

After lunch, the afternoon session produced more of the same with a further two Kermadec Petrels plus over 20 White Terns. We also had great views of a very close fly over immature Long-tailed Skua and connected with two Providence Petrels (one down the starboard side followed shortly after by another down the port side). At this time our first Black Noddies were noted. An immature Gibson's Albatross was the only 'albert' of the day and the last southern hemisphere albatross of the trip as we headed further north.

In the last hour before dinner, we managed to see at least five Little Shearwaters, a couple of which showed really well close to the ship. After dinner, we attended the daily log which was followed by a short, but very amusing, presentation by Phil on the birds of Norfolk Island.

Day 5 - Monday 25th March – Norfolk Island, Australia

18:00: 28°18'S 167°45'E

Ships time changed overnight by -1 hour, so breakfast was early at 06.45am, just as we arrived and anchored off Norfolk Island. After breakfast and up on deck, we saw large numbers of Black Noddies and White Terns along with smaller numbers of Grey Ternlets and Brown Noddies. Also present were Masked Boobies of the 'Tasman' race, which have dark eyes, unlike the pale eyed birds we would see later in the voyage.

Thankfully, the weather had been kind and there was just a slight swell, enabling us to board the zodiacs safely and make our landing (not always guaranteed as previous trips will testify). This was followed by a short bus ride up to Palm Glen Nature Reserve, adding California Quail and Pacific Emerald Dove by the side of the road. We worked the main track in the Reserve and soon had a fine



male Norfolk Robin, Golden (Norfolk Island) Whistler (which will surely soon be split) and Grey Fantail. Whilst trying for Norfolk Parakeet, which was calling nearby, we had excellent views of both Norfolk Gerygone and Slender-billed White-eye, but the parakeets would not budge.

Norfolk Robin © Mark Newsome

We headed back up the track but soon found out that Frank Lambert had found a Norfolk Parakeet showing really well a short distance from where we were. We soon joined Frank and settled in to watch a single parakeet as it performed beautifully, much to the appreciation of all present.

With all the key species in the bag, we headed to the picnic area where the local agent and her team had prepared an excellent range of refreshments which included cake and what was apparently the 'best humous in the world' !!



The Golden Whistlers on Norfolk Island are so different from those in Australia that it is surely only a matter of time before this highly distinctive subspecies gets split © Mark Newsome

We returned to the minibuses suitably refreshed and were taken on a whistle stop tour of the island before heading back to the ship and lunch. The afternoon was spent on deck as we headed north and away from Norfolk Island. We encountered many of the same species of seabirds as yesterday, with large numbers of Black-winged Petrels being noted and four close Little Shearwaters (which were much appreciated by those that had missed this species the previous evening). Three Kermadec Petrels, a single Tahiti Petrel and a White-necked Petrel were noted and a Black Petrel followed the ship for most of the afternoon. The most unusual sighting, however, was of a breaching whale, first seen some distance off the bow and then again, nearer to starboard. Undoubtedly a beaked whale and, from photos, thought to be Blainville's.

Day 6 - Tuesday 26th March – At Sea (heading north to New Caledonia)

06:00: 25°54'S 166°59'E 18:00: 24°29'S 166°38'E

An oil drip was started in the early hours of the morning with the plan to chum in an area of sea mounts at 06.30am. The sea state was slightly choppy so our chances of attracting anything were lessened. The slick was, however, quite successful, and at least two Tahiti Petrels and a Gould's Petrel were tempted in.

We then continued our journey north towards New Caledonia and, during the course of the day, had sightings of White-necked Petrels, further Tahiti Petrels, three Kermadec Petrels, two Providence Petrels and a couple of Red-footed Boobies. A distant blow eventually turned out to be a pod of around five Sperm Whales as they surfaced near the ship and drifted down our starboard side.

Day 7 – Wednesday 27th March - Arrival at New Caledonia and Mt Koghi, New Caledonia

06:00: 22°68'S 166°37'E

Early morning saw us approaching New Caledonia with the keen birders up on deck in slightly murky conditions with light rain. Despite this, there were good views of many Gould's Petrels at close range, and a single Collared Petrel swung in close to the ship. There were also at least four Short-tailed Shearwaters present. A couple of Bridled Terns were also noteworthy.

Our Pilot boarded around 06.30am and we headed in through the reef entrance and on towards Noumea, where we docked. Some of us took the opportunity to stretch our legs before the afternoon birding excursion to Mount Koghi, adding Wandering Tattler and our first speciality, Grey-eared Honeyeater, to the list.

Wandering Tattler © Mark Newsome

Noon arrived and we departed in our buses up to Mount Koghi. There

was drizzle in the air on arrival but thankfully this soon cleared away giving us a mostly dry afternoon.



Firstly, we slowly walked back along the entrance road and were soon enjoying one of the most sought-after species on this leg of the tour, namely New Caledonian Crow. This was shortly followed by Barred Honeyeater, Rufous Whistler, Fan-tailed Gerygone and Coconut Lorikeet. Chris then took us to a spot by the side of the road where he had found New Caledonian Thicketbird, which is usually an extremely tricky species to see. A quick burst of playback and the bird appeared perching up for all to see. With this species in the bag, we headed further down the road ticking off three New Caledonian Parakeets as they flew over the road calling.



Barred Honeyeater © Mark Newsome

It was time to head back up the road as we needed to check out the forest trail. On the way, we connected with New Caledonian Friarbird and, although they gave us the runaround, pretty much all of us got some sort of view of the Red-throated Parrotfinches feeding up high in a conifer tree. New Caledonian Whistler was next up and, as we headed towards the head of the forest trail, we found a small group of Striated Starlings and four Horned Parakeets perched up. A Metallic Pigeon also flew in to the same tree showing well.



Cloven-feathered Dove © Mark Newsome

In the forest proper, we had success with South Melanesian Cuckooshrike, Southern Shrikebill, Yellow-bellied Flyrobin and New Caledonian Fantail. Some of the group also had views of New Caledonia (White-bellied) Goshawk and Cloven-feathered Dove before it was time to return to the minibuses and take the short drive back to the harbour.

It had been a very successful afternoon but thoughts now turned to tomorrow and Kagu!!

Day 8 – Thursday 28th March - Riviere Bleue, New Caledonia and sailing North West

18:00: 22°15'S 165°46'E

It was a very early start with breakfast served at 3am. We were off the ship an hour later and heading by coach to Riviere Bleue Nature Reserve for a date with the 'grey chicken'. We arrived at the park entrance in good time, then over the pedestrian access bridge before being ferried in groups by smaller minibuses to the edge of the forest. All very efficiently completed by our crew and local team.

As a group we then headed down the main track to find Kagu. After about 15 minutes or so, Jean-Marc (the Park's senior ranger) got his spade out and started digging up patches of earth just inside the tree line. This soon had the desired result of attracting an immature and adult Kagu, which gave excellent views to the assembled crowd for about half an hour. Eventually we were all 'Kagued' out, if that is possible, and it was time to hit the main track to find some of the other specialities of the area.

First up was a nice Yellow-bellied Flyrobin before we located a group of very vocal New Caledonian Whistlers and a pair of Southern Shrikebills which were building a nest. Word then arrived via the radios that a Cloven-feathered Dove had been found back where our first Kagus had been feeding, so back we went. Thankfully, the dove was still on show and performed really well, giving much relief to those who had missed this species yesterday.

Retracing our steps, we had a New Caledonian Cuckooshrike, along with further and much better looks at New Caledonian Streaked Fantail, three Horned Parakeets, a single, very flighty, Red-throated Parrotfinch and another pair of Southern Shrikebill.

It decided to rain quite heavily at lunchtime and, although a couple of New Caledonian Parakeets showed on and off, we thought our chances of seeing much else, including Crow Honeyeater, had passed. That was until the radios sparked into life again as a Crow Honeyeater had been located along the boardwalk. It was a bit of a bunfight as there was very little room and everyone jostled to see the bird but most of the group got some views of this critically endangered species.

It was now time to leave and a couple more goshawks were seen by the side of the entrance road as we exited the park. We arrived back at the ship on schedule and sailed out of the harbour at 3pm. A few Fairy Terns were scoped distantly on the sand spits inside the coral reef, and a small pod of Spinner Dolphins were seen briefly.

Out in to the ocean proper, we had large numbers of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and Gould's Petrels, plus nine Tahiti Petrels. The sun disappeared below the horizon at just after 18:00: and put a close what had been a very memorable day.

Day 9 – Friday 29th March - At Sea (Heading to the Solomon Islands)

06:00: 20°26'S 163°38'E 18:00: 18°20'S 162°31'E

At sunrise there was a good movement of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, along with a close Collared Petrel, Tahiti Petrel and a couple of Short-tailed Shearwaters. We 'chummed' at 9am, the slick attracting a further four Tahiti Petrels and a single Gould's Petrel.

The sea state for the day was quite high with a decent swell but we did see a respectable total of 18 Tahiti Petrels (including the five from the early morning), a further two Collared Petrels, four White-tailed Tropicbirds, seven Providence Petrels (one of which gave cracking views), a pale-eyed Masked Booby, Brown Booby and a large number of Red-footed Boobies, which followed our passage trying, and sometimes successfully, to catch the flying fish around the ship. We also had a single Greater Crested Tern and multiple Lesser and Great Frigatebirds as we headed north towards the Solomon Islands.

Day 10 – Saturday 30th March – At Sea (Heading to the Solomon Islands)

06:00: 15°41'S 162°27'E 18:00: 13°13'S 162°25'E

We awoke to murky weather and a choppy sea, but those up on deck early were rewarded with a couple of 'Melanesian' Tropical Shearwaters. The status of these birds is highly complex and confusing with recent splits by many authorities.

Seawatching turned out to be quite slow today but, with persistence, we managed a fair selection of seabirds, with a Black-winged Petrel, a single Band-rumped Storm Petrel, a Kermadec Petrel and 20+ Sooty Terns. A small pod of around six dolphins headed towards the ship later in the day and were, through some superb photos, clearly identified as Rough-toothed Dolphins, with the photos also showing a female with a young calf.

Day 11 - Sunday 31st March - Santa Ana, Solomon Islands

06:00: 10°49'S 162°26'E 18:00: 10°53'S 162°21'E

After clearing customs and immigration into the Solomons, we boarded the zodiacs and were taken ashore by the Heritage Team to the lovely island of Santa Ana for a morning birding session. We soon connected with the Solomon's endemic Sooty Myzomela around the landing area and, as we started the trail, a couple of Chestnut-bellied Monarchs popped up on to a nearby palm, this being the black subspecies which is only found on Santa Ana and Ugi. White-headed Fruit Dove and Silver-capped Fruit Dove were added and we also found a fine White-collared Monarch and the recently split Solomons Rufous Fantail.

Moving along the trail, a male Oriole Whistler eventually gave itself up to the group and we had excellent scope views of a perched Pied Goshawk and Island Imperial Pigeon. A Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon was seen by some, as was a Long-tailed Triller.

It was now time to head back to the ship to have lunch and freshen up before returning to the island for the 'official' welcome from the villagers. They put on an amazing show with a 'warrior' greeting as we landed, followed by music, dancing and singing. This has to be one of the highlights of the trip and was enjoyed by all.



Some of the dancers on Santa Ana © Tracey Barber

In the late afternoon, some of us took a walk back into the surrounding forest adding Oriental Dollarbird and incredible close views of Melanesian Scrubfowl as they attended the mound where they lay their eggs. It was then time to return to the ship for dinner.

Day 12 – Monday 1st April – Makira and Anuta, Solomon Islands

06:00: 10°21'S 161°22'E 18:00: 10°13'S 161°36'E

We landed on Makira after the Expedition Team had reconnoitred the island for a suitable landing site and birding trail and once we had safely made it ashore, we slowly made our way uphill along a wide track. We had good views of Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove, whilst some in the group managed to connect with a male Cardinal Myzomela. The tiny endemic Mottled Flowerpecker was heard and seen in flight a number of times before one eventually showed really well collecting nesting material and we even had scope views!

Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon was seen distantly with a large mixed group of Island and Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons. A Pacific Kingfisher was posing down by the landing area and was still there on our return. Three male Papuan Eclectus Parrots were also seen on our walk uphill plus we had a few Makira Flycatchers. Unfortunately, it rained pretty much all the time we were ashore, but during a short dry spell, Makira Cicadabird, Chestnut-bellied Monarch and a small flock of Long-tailed Trillers were located. A perched White-headed Fruit Dove was also a good find.

Some of the group had gone a little further down the track and reported that a Makira Honeyeater had been seen briefly by some. It was absolutely chucking it down with rain by now so we started heading back down hill to the landing site. It was a slightly damp group that headed back to the ship!

We had lunch and then headed to another welcome ceremony on Anuta. We were again greeted by a warrior party on the beach, followed by the offering of garlands and entertainment in the form of music and dancing. We then had a chance to interact with the villagers, with the opportunity to purchase some of their most amazing wood carvings, before going back to the ship. We also managed to get excellent views of Sanford's Sea Eagle, and both Beach Kingfisher and Grey-tailed Tattler were added to the list.

Day 13 – Tuesday 2nd April – Mount Austin, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands

06:00: 9°25'S 159°57'E 18:00: 8°54'S 159°16'E

It was another very early start today with breakfast at 3am and departure from the ship at 4.15am, but it was well worth it. The weather gods were kind to us and we arrived at Mount Austin just before sun up. Chris gave us a short briefing for the morning and we set off down the main track at a slow pace. Woodford's Rail was, as usual, heard but not seen in a grassy patch nearby but soon after this we had excellent views of Solomons Cockatoo, the first of many Blyth's Hornbills and some fly over Cardinal Lories. Buff-headed Coucal was calling to our left and somehow crossed the track unsighted but, with patience, we had excellent views of one bird as it perched in the open.

Carrying on downhill we connected with Steel-blue Flycatcher, Common Cicadabird and Long-tailed Myna, but the calling White-billed Crow stubbornly refused to cooperate. We stopped at a clearing where Claret-breasted Fruit Dove, Brown-winged Starling, Moustached Treeswift and Yellow-bibbed Lory were all seen well. An Ultramarine Kingfisher was heard calling distantly but attempts to call this in proved unsuccessful.

Frank then wanted to try for Woodford's Rail in an open area which was being cultivated. A wise choice as the birds responded to playback immediately, with one bird coming in very close and briefly showing itself to most of the assembled group members.

Further down the track, our local guide halted at an Ultramarine Kingfisher territory, with the birds showing incredibly well. A little further down and some of the group had brief views of Finsch's Pygmy Parrot along with further looks at Common Cicadabird. It was now time head back uphill to the buses and then back to the ship for lunch.

In the afternoon we set sail for Tetepare, with cetaceans being the main highlights. A pod of around half a dozen Sperm Whales was seen, along with another two individuals a little further out, illustrating their diagnostic blow and diving sequence. We also had a couple of Rough-toothed Dolphins, a distant pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales and Pantropical Dolphins. Best, however, was a lovely close pod of around 20 False Killer Whales, which showed exceptionally well with them spy-hopping and tail slapping. It made for a fine end to an eventful day.

Day 14 - Wednesday 3rd April – Tetepare, Solomon Islands

06:00: 8°43'S 157°26'E 18:00: 8°43'S 157°26'E

The beautiful island of Tetepare was our destination for the morning, with the zodiacs getting us ashore just after dawn. Sahul Sunbird, a recent split from Olive-backed Sunbird, seemed to be everywhere and the first of today's Song Parrots was seen whilst the group assembled before heading off on the various tracks which radiate from the landing area. Cardinal Lory was soon added but Crimson-rumped Myzomela proved a bit trickier, only being seen by a few. We 'twitched' a Kolombangara Monarch, which had been located on an uphill stretch in the forest, before heading to our official island greeting.

The greeting was genuinely warm and welcoming, as is usual in the Solomons, and included another warrior dance followed by a talk by the local conservation group on how they are doing some excellent work on the island. We were then shown a number of Coconut Crabs of various different sizes, including a very impressive and very large adult, after which some of the group went down to the water's edge to witness a Green Turtle being measured and weighed before being released back into the ocean.

Other members of the group managed to connect with Melanesian Megapode and then we all had great looks at one of the best birds on the island, White-capped Monarch. Dark-eyed White-eye was seen really well, as was Claret-breasted Fruit Dove. Satisfied with our morning, it was time to head back for the ship for lunch.

The planned afternoon visit to the nearby island of Rendova had to be cancelled as the sea state in the landing area was not safe, so we headed back to the sheltered bay on Tetepare. Here, we enjoyed further looks at the species we had seen during the morning, whilst some took up the option to go snorkelling. Birds included scope views of three Song Parrots and a White-capped Monarch on a nest. Some of the group also connected with the elusive Crimson-rumped Myzomela.

Back on the ship and, as evening drew in, we did one of the most unusual and, to put it bluntly, mad things I have ever done! The ship was positioned close to shore at the very western tip of Tetepare to enable us to view a small inlet where Solomons Nightjar is known to nest. As the light faded, the call of the nightjar was blasted out on the ship's tannoy system and the powerful searchlight was turned on to illuminate the island. A couple of birds were seen that had potential to have been nightjars but, unfortunately, nowhere near tickable views. It was a gallant effort and at least some of the group came away with flight views of Nicobar Pigeon.

Day 15 – Thursday 4th April – Kolombangara, Solomon Islands

06:00: 8°08'S 157°07'E 18:00: 8°06'S 157°00'E

The weather gods were with us again this morning as we made a very early start to get to our forest destination on Kolombangara before dawn. Everything was very well organised and, after our dry zodiac landing in the dark, we were driven up to Imbu Rano Lodge in open top trucks. Arriving in very good time, we set ourselves up on the viewing platform at the lodge and listened to the bird song as the sun came up, with stunning views of the volcano and surrounding forest in front of us.

As the light increased, we soon had our main target from the lookout when a small flock of Pale Mountain Pigeons flew into a fruiting tree for decent scope views. We tried calling in Roviana Rail without success but the rarely seen Crested Cuckoo Dove was calling close-by. A few bursts of play-back and incredibly the bird flew in, displaying in flight and then landing in full view with its crest raised. This proved to be a lifer for most of the Expedition Team, including our Expedition Leader Chris, highlighting how rarely this bird is seen. Whilst this was all kicking off a small flock of Duchess Parakeets flew through and proved to be the only sighting of this species on the trip.



Crested Cuckoo Dove © Mark Newsome

Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon © Mark Newsome

Walking up and down the entrance track, we connected with Kolombangara Monarch and White-capped Monarch, repeats from yesterday, plus good views of our first Solomons White-eyes. Fly over Lorikeets were mostly Coconut, but there were a few Cardinal Lories mixed in. We could hear Finsch's Pygmy-Parrot and, with a little bit of encouragement, one bird showed really well. We headed back to the ship very pleased with our morning's birding.

The ship repositioned during lunch and, in the afternoon, we explored another area of the island, firstly taking a zodiac cruise in a mangrove surrounded bay. Here we found a North Melanesian Cuckooshrike before it started to rain quite heavily, so we headed for shore and some shelter. Upon landing the rain soon eased and we split up in to two groups to look for Roviana Rail and, whilst doing this, we had a further North Melanesian Cuckooshrike posing in a nearby tree. The



two groups headed off in separate directions but, despite a thorough search, only one group managed to hear the rail but, alas, there were no sightings.

Back on the ship, we continued our journey north-west and said goodbye to the Solomon Islands, which had provided us with some wonderful experiences that will live long in the memory.

Day 16 – Friday 5th April - At Sea (West of Bougainville, PNG)

06:00: 7°11'S 155°08'E 18:00: 5°48'S 154°21'E

Today was a sea day as we cruised up the west side of the large island of Bougainville heading towards our next stop in Micronesia. The morning started well with good views of a Pygmy Sperm Whale. A short time after this, the first Heinroth's Shearwater, our main target for this area, was seen, with another being seen later in the day. We also saw a couple of Grey-backed Terns which, as is usual for this species, kept well away from the approaching ship.

The morning also brought sightings of a single Sperm Whale, one Bryde's Whale and a Fin Whale. A large pod of dolphins at some distance were thought to be Pantropical Spotted, due to their jizz, and a single Spinner Dolphin was also seen.

In the afternoon a single Long-tailed Skua and an Orma's Whale were also seen, along with Bulwer's Petrel and small numbers of Streaked Shearwaters. Chumming in the afternoon only resulted in the usual Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

Day 17 – Saturday 6th April - At Sea (South, East and North of New Ireland, PNG)

06:00: 4°29'S 153°20'E 18:00: 2°44'S 153°14'E

At dawn the ship was off the coast of New Ireland and the Expedition Team set a slick, which soon attracted our main target for the today, the rare and recently rediscovered Beck's Petrel, with two birds over the slick and showing really well. As we cruised further north, we had additional sightings of Beck's Petrels with the total day list for this species running to 8+ individuals.

Around 20 Wedge-tailed Shearwaters were seen during the course of the day, along with a couple of Bulwer's Petrels and a single Streaked Shearwater. With the exception of the usual Booby species hanging around the ship, and pod of around 20 Short-finned Pilot Whales (which interrupted lunch!), that was about it.

Day 18 – Sunday 7th April - At Sea (heading to Chuuk, Micronesia)

06:00: 0°30'S 152°41'E 18:00: 1°32'N 152°28'E

This was meant to be a quiet sea day but it was apparent from early on that this was not going to be the case. Things started well when a number of Leach's Petrels were seen and, during the course of the day we had 30+, some very close to the ship and from the photographs taken, interestingly, most were in moult.



Leach's Storm Petrel were seen in unprecedented numbers on WPO 2024 © Mark Newsome

We also had great looks at Bulwer's Petrels, a couple of which flew close to the ship, and later in the day a South Polar Skua was seen along with an unidentified 'dark-rumped' petrel species. A small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins also put in an appearance, along with a couple of White-tailed Tropicbirds, again, close to the ship.

One of the major highlights today, however, was crossing the equator at 9am. Neptune and his mermaid made an appearance as we celebrated with those who were making this important crossing by sea for the first time.

Day 19 – Monday 8th April - At Sea (heading to Chuuk, Micronesia)

06:00: 4°43'N 152°19'E 18:00: 5°40'N 152°10'E

This was predicted to be another quiet day at sea and a great opportunity to relax or catch up with field notes, photos and rest weary eyes. At least that is what we thought would happen but, by early morning, we started to get in to small groups of Leach's Petrels interspersed with light phase Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and a few Bulwer's Petrels. It was enough to keep us interested so most of us stayed up on deck.



Wedge-tailed Shearwater (pale phase) © Mark Newsome

Around midday, we encountered large areas of the sea boiling up with fish coming to the surface and over these were serious numbers of Wedgies and Leach's Storm Petrels. One 'bait ball' covered the area of a football pitch and was swarming with Leach's Storm Petrels. Our final day count numbered

a conservative estimate of 50+ Leach's, much higher than any previous WPO day count, including yesterday!

Day 20 – Tuesday 9th April – Weno, Chuuk, Micronesia

06:00: 7°43'N 151°48'E

The sun came up as we headed towards the narrow entrance through the reef that surrounds Chuuk, Micronesia. Outside of the reef, we had around 10-20 'Micronesian' Tropical Shearwaters and large numbers of Brown and Black Noddies and White Terns. Inside the reef, three Short-tailed Shearwaters were noteworthy and, as we docked, a couple of Island Swiftlets flew over the ship to greet us, with our first Black-naped Terns close to the shore.

Island Swiftlet, Weno © Mark Newsome

Whilst waiting for the ship to be cleared by Customs and Immigration, we birded from the outside decks, adding our first Micronesian Myzomela and Micronesian Starling to the list. The ship was cleared without too much of a delay and this then gave us a couple of hours to explore town and stretch our legs.



There were many more Micronesian Myzomelas on show and we soon added Oceanic Flycatcher. In a small remnant area of reeds we called out the strange looking Caroline Reed Warbler and, further along the road, a small feeding group of Citrine White-eyes had been staked out for us.



Caroline Reed Warbler, Weno © Mark Newsome

After lunch back on the ship, we loaded into minibuses and headed to a birding spot on the other side of the airstrip adding Oriental Pratincole on the way. At our stop, we walked the road seeing pretty much the same selection of birds as earlier, but also nailing White-fronted Ground Dove and getting

great looks at perched Purple-capped Fruit Doves. A fly over Yellow Bittern was a nice bonus and, on the way back to the ship, we stopped for better views of the pratincoles on the airfield.



White-fronted Ground Dove, Weno © Mark Newsome

Day 21 – Wednesday 10th April – Weno, Dublong, Tol South, Chuuk, Micronesia

18:00: 7°55'N 151°50'E

Another fine morning greeted us, if not a little breezy. Today was a day of options. Some of the group remained on Weno and reconnected with a number of the island endemics, along with Blue-faced Parrotfinch. The intrepid members of the group (or the 'Crazy Gang' as they liked to be known) opted for the long zodiac ride and tough climb up Tol South where they found both Chuuk Monarch and Teardrop White-eye.



Pacific Golden Plover, Weno © Mark Newsome

The remainder of the group headed to the island of Dublong, which had not been visited on any previous WPOs. After a rather wet zodiac ride, we landed on this lovely island which turned out to be much cleaner and more scenic than Weno. It was soon apparent that the local population take more care of their environment and had a greater understanding of the natural world that surrounds them.

Not only this but we also found all the endemics seen on Weno the previous day plus the much sought after Chuuk Monarch. We also had cracking views of a pair of Blue-faced Parrotfinches nest building by the side of the trail. Much to Kenny's delight, we also had good views of day-flying Chuuk Flying-Foxes. I am sure future WPOs will revisit this lovely island.

We sailed out of port early afternoon and, as we exited the reef, saw good numbers of 'Micronesian' Tropical Shearwaters and a few Bulwer's Petrels as the sun set on a truly eventful day.

Day 22 – Thursday 11th April - At Sea (heading North to Japan)

06:00: 10°09'N 150°25'E 18:00: 12°21'N 148°56'E

Another day at sea and, as predicted, it was quiet, with 250+ Short-tailed Shearwaters heading North the highlight of the day. However, as usual, there was plenty to keep us amused with some excellent lectures from our ever-busy Expedition Team.

Day 23 – Friday 12th April - At Sea (heading North to Japan)

06:00: 14°32'N 147°29'E 18:00: 16°52'N 146°25'E

This is another of the quiet sea days with the highlights being the three species of booby around the ship, which certainly kept the photographers amused with their often unsuccessful attempts to catch flying fish. There was also a dark phase Pomarine Skua and a few Short-tailed Shearwaters passing North.

Day 24 – Saturday 13th April - At Sea (heading North to Japan)

06:00: 21°25'N 144°46'E 18:00: 19°17'N 145°47'E

This morning started well with our first Bannerman's Shearwaters of the day and many pale Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. During the course of the day, we had well over ten Bannerman's Shearwaters, some of which passed very close to the bow of the ship.

Bulwer's Petrels were around in small numbers and the three species of booby around the ship were a great distraction. Andy then pointed out that there was a Matsudaira's Storm Petrel following in our wake, the first for the trip, which created much excitement. During the course of the day these were joined by others with at least six Matsudaira's Storm Petrels together at one stage.

Day 25 – Sunday 14th April – At Sea (heading North to Japan)

06:00: 23°09'N 143°58'E 18:00: 24°49'N 143°12'E

As we headed closer to the southern Japanese Islands, it was evident that the number of seabirds was on the increase. One of our main targets for today soon gave itself up when a Bonin Petrel cruised past the ship with over 50 individuals seen during the rest of the day.

Good numbers of Matsudaira's Storm Petrels had already been seen when the team set a chum slick, which attracted an incredible 40-50 birds coming to the smell of fish oil. It also had the bonus of attracting a couple of Bonin Petrels as well. In addition to this, we also had double figures of Bannerman's Shearwaters during the day.

Wedge-tailed Shearwaters were again around in good numbers, and we also had a single Wilson's Storm Petrel and a Flesh-footed Shearwater following the ship during our barbeque lunch on the rear decks.



Matsudaira's Storm Petrel © Mark Newsome



Since WPO 2024 concluded "Brewster's Brown Booby" has been split by the IOC as Cocos Booby © Mark Newsome

After the excellent feast laid on by our crew, and back on the Monkey Deck, a Kermadec Petrel was seen tracking the ship, when one of the eagle-eyed birders identified a 'Brewster's' Brown Booby mixed in with the ever present 'Indo-Pacific' Brown Boobies. '

Brewster's breeds along the Gulf of California and seems to only be a rare

vagrant to this part of the world. A great find and a bird destined to be split by the IOC.

Day 26 - Monday 15th April – Chichi-jima, Japan

06:00: 26°37'N 142°22'E 18:00: 27°05'N 142°16'E

We awoke to another murky misty morning as we sailed passed some of the southern Japanese Islands. We took shelter on the port side lower decks and witnessed a large movement of Tristram's Storm Petrels as they headed out to sea. Bonin Petrels were also in evidence, along with Bannerman's Shearwaters and a single Streaked Shearwater.



Bonin Petrel © Mark Newsome

As we approached Chichi-jima, we had lovely looks at our first Black-footed Albatross of the trip plus great views of a number of Humpback Whales, which the area is famed for and is a great pull for tourists. We even saw a calf breaching as we headed towards the harbour. Just outside the harbour, we saw a mating pair of Green Turtles and on the quay a small flock of around 20 Pacific Golden Plovers.



Bannerman's Shearwater © Mark Newsome

The harbour entrance at Chichi-jima is so narrow that the ship had to reverse in to the dock, an incredible manoeuvre but completed without any issues thanks to our professional crew. Whilst we cleared Immigration and Customs, we birded from the upper decks, adding Brown-eared Bulbul, Japanese White-eye, Eastern Buzzard and some were lucky to see a couple of Black (Japanese) Wood Pigeons flying through a nearby valley.

With the clearance process completed, we had time to disembark and walk into the nearby hills. Here, we soon had a better look at Brown-eared Bulbul and Japanese White-eye and also found a pair of Blue Rock Thrush which were nesting in a container on the dock.

Up in the hills, we soon encountered our first Japanese Bush Warbler, which seemed to be singing everywhere, and then there was a mad dash to see a Japanese Woodpigeon which had been discovered feeding on one of the tracks.

We headed back to the ship in plenty of time to depart for our quest to find the rare Bryan's Shearwater, which breeds on a small rocky outcrop to the south east of the island. Humpback Whales put on a show as we headed out and we got lucky when a Laysan Albatross flew very close to the ship and this would prove to be the only one for the trip.

More Black-footed Albatross were seen but, unfortunately, the sea state was working against us. The wind had got up and the sea was quite choppy. Despite our best efforts and some excellent piloting by our Captain, we did not locate a Bryan's Shearwater. We kept on looking until dusk but, as the light faded, it was time to call it a day and continue northwards.

Day 27 – Tuesday 16th April – Torishima, Japan

06:00: 29°19'N 141°00'S 18:00: 30°53'N 140°18'E

Today was one of the major highlights of the trip as this was only the third time since 2009 that the ship had been authorised to get close to Torishima Island and the experience was spectacular. As we circumnavigated the island, we had dozens of Short-tailed Albatrosses around the ship and distant views of three of the colonies on the island, where several hundred individuals were present. It must have been an awesome sight to have seen this before the arrival of man, when hundreds of thousands of Short-tailed Albatrosses nested on the island.

In addition, there were good numbers of Black-footed Albatross, as they also breed on Torishima, and another breaching Humpback Whale was observed. To add to the drama, the island is an active volcano and we could see steam coming out of the crater.

All too soon it was time to leave and head north, where we had further views of Bonin Petrel, Tristram's Storm Petrel, Streaked Shearwater and Short-tailed Shearwater.

Day 28 – Wednesday 17th April – Miyake-jima, Japan

06:00: 33°18'N 140°00'E 18:00: 34°08'N 139°29'E

The morning was spent seawatching as we approached the island of Miyake-jima. The count of Black-footed Albatrosses got into double figures and a single adult Short-tailed Albatross was also seen. Again, Leach's Storm Petrels were in evidence, with a couple being noted during the morning session, and three species of skua, namely Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed, were also found. As we approached the island, literally thousands of Streaked Shearwaters were flying around the ship which was an incredible sight.

Our planned landing site was not viable due to the windy conditions offshore, but whilst the ship turned, some of us managed to get on to a couple of Japanese Murrelet. Black-tailed Gulls were also seen along with at least one Japanese Cormorant and a few Pelagic Cormorants. A small group of Pacific Swift were also noted.

Expedition Leader Chris and the Captain continued to search for a safe place to go ashore, eventually locating a bay further to the north of our original planned landing site, which was sheltered from the

wind. The Expedition Team then did a sterling job with making alternative arrangements with the local bus drivers and we were soon ashore for our afternoon excursion to the Miyake Nature Centre and surrounding woodland.

On site, we soon had a singing Ijima's Leaf Warbler, which showed well, before connecting with a pair of Owston's Tit further up the trail. On one of the entrance roads, an Izu Robin was calling but refused to show so we tried for Izu Thrush, which had been seen by another group close by. The male and female Izu Thrush were very skittish but both landed a few times in the open before disappearing back into cover.

We then headed back to try again for Izu Robin. Eventually, most of us got a decent look at the bird, with Meadow Bunting and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker also seen in the car park, before it was time to head back to the ship.

We had a lovely farewell from the locals who had apparently not seen a cruise ship visit the island for 15 years! After sailing away from the island, we attempted to locate Japanese Murrelet in the failing light with a least 3-4 birds seen flying close to the ship. A breaching Humpback was an added bonus.

Our last night on the ship was heralded by our fantastic Captain's farewell dinner and this gave us the opportunity to applaud our wonderful crew, who had looked after us so superbly during the course of our cruise.

Day 29 – Thursday 18th April – Yokohama, Japan

The early risers witnessed us sailing into Yokohama Harbour on our final morning aboard Heritage Adventurer. Slaty-backed Gull, Black-tailed Gull, Vega Gull and Black-headed Gulls were seen along with a large number of Great Cormorants. We docked at 06:00: and the last new bird seen from the ship was a fly over Peregrine Falcon.

Breakfast was taken as we made our Customs and Immigration clearance on to the mainland and then it was time to leave the ship for the final time on this tour.

With heavy hearts we said our goodbyes to our amazing Expedition Team and then made our way off the ship for the journey home.

We hope you enjoyed the trip and that you take away many happy memories of your time on the Western Pacific Odyssey.

Thank you so much for participating in the tour, it was a pleasure travelling with you all and we hope that we get the chance to travel with you again sometime in the future.