Pelagic birds encountered off the Durban coast
| Gannets and Boobies (Sulidae) | Cape Gannet  
*Morus capensis*  
Adults Gannets are quite unmistakeable with their yellow head, black and white wings and long dagger like beak. They have a long black gular stripe and pale eyes, outer tail feathers are black. There is a chance that Australian Gannet could occur in our waters, which would have a darker eye, white outer tail feathers and a shorter gular stripe. (We have not yet encountered one on our pelagics.) The young birds need to be carefully looked out to eliminate possible Boobies, being Brown, Red-footed and Masked. The immature birds are a rich brown colour. Gannets breed off the Cape and Namibian coasts – they start laying in September – they are most numerous off KZN in the winter, often coinciding with the sardine run. |  
| --- | --- |  
|  | Red-footed Booby  
*Sula sula*  
Red footed Boobies occur in a variety of colour morphs. We have encountered them on two occasions off Durban, both being immature birds, but we know the white morph adults have been seen on the south coast. The *rubripes* subspecies occurring off our coast breed on Indian Ocean islands, pretty much all year round, so could in theory be found in our waters at any time of the year. |  
|  | Albatrosses (*Diomediadae*) |  
| Wandering Albatross  
*Diomedea exulans*  
This large Albatross has the largest wingspan of all extant birds, a touch over 3 meters. Characteristics are large size and an all white back. It lacks the black cutting edges to the bill seen on the two Royal Albatross species. As the birds get older, so the upperwings become whiter. Immature birds are brown and usually show a “monkey suit” plumage, with a brown cap and white face. The majority of the birds in our waters will be from the breeding colony on Gough Island, the nominate *exulans* subspecies. |
**Sooty Albatross**  
*Phoebetria fusca*

If you hear us going beserk and shouting “BLACK BETTY!” at the top of our voices, it is because we have seen this bird. We have had one encounter so far, on quite a windy day, on the 4th June 2016, this juvenile bird sailed into view and stayed with us for almost 15 minutes. It was most likely off the Gough or Tristan group of islands, and this individual had probably fledged in the last month. It is one of only two brown/grey albatrosses, both of which are rare in our waters.

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**Black-browed Albatross**  
*Thalassarche melanophris*

Most of the birds encountered off Durban are immature. The bill is a lighter grey than Indian Yellow-nosed, and slightly bulkier. They show a noticeable grey wash around the neck, and almost totally dark underwings. As the birds age, the neck turns white and the black eyebrow becomes more distinct – the bill yellows, eventually becoming yellow with a reddish tip. These birds tend to move northerly of their breeding grounds, so the birds we see are probably off the Falklands, South Georgia (SW), Heard and Kerguelen (SE) islands.

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**Shy Albatross**  
*Thalassarche cauta*

This is the next largest to the *Diomedea* albatrosses. The underwing is almost entirely white, with a thin black border, showing a noticeable black thumbprint in its “armpit”. Again most birds encountered off Durban are immature birds. The bill is a blueish grey with a dark tip, which turns yellow in adult birds – it is a robust bill, and the blueish tinge lends to its Afrikaans name, Bloubekalbatros. Young birds also tend to show a grey wash around the neck. Pictured is an adult bird. They breed on the Australasian islands – most of our birds are of the nominate *cauta* race,
**Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross**
*Thalassarche carteri*
This is the most common Albatross encountered in KZN waters. Its close cousin, the Atlantic Yellow-nosed, differs by having a grey wash over the head, and a more pronounced black triangle around the eye. They are the smallest albatrosses occurring in our waters, and are recognised by the broader black leading edge on the underwing, with a thinner trailing edge. The bill is slender and black with a yellow ridge on the upper mandible, tipped red in mature adults. Young birds lack the yellow ridge, which appears with age. They breed on St. Paul  Amsterdam, Crozet and Prince Edward Islands in the southern Indian Ocean.

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**Petrels and Shearwaters (Procellariidae)**

**Southern Giant Petrel**
*Macronectes giganteus*
These huge petrels are even bigger than the small albatrosses, weighing over 4kg and with a wingspan of around 2 meters. They have a distinct hump backed look to them in flight – we usually see them singly. Southern Giant is recognisable by the greenish tip to the bill. It occurs in dark and white morphs, the dark being the more common. They breed on a variety of southern Atlantic and Indian Ocean islands.

**Northern Giant Petrel**
*Macronectes halli*
Northerns are similar to their Southern cousins, but adults tend to have paler heads. The bill is tipped a deep red colour. The majority of our birds are from the Marion Island population, although they also breed on a variety of islands.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Pintado (Cape) Petrel</strong></th>
<th><em>Daption capense</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These are one of the most striking pelagic birds with their distinctive black and white wing pattern. It is a small petrel, in winter often arriving at chum slicks in ones and twos after the bigger birds have had their fill. Our birds are of the nominate race, which breed on a variety of southern ocean islands, as well as on the Antarctic peninsula.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Antarctic Prion</strong></th>
<th><em>Pachyptila desolata</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These small, beautifully marked birds arrive in winter time, in small numbers off the KZN coast. The different species are extremely difficult to tell apart at sea – Antarctic are by far the most common, showing a clearly demarcated black “M” marking on the upperwings, with the sides of the chests being distinctly washed grey. The tail is tipped black, the extent of this can be variable. They breed on a variety of the southern ocean islands.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Slender-billed Prion</strong></th>
<th><em>Pachyptila belcheri</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>We have only definitively identified this species on one pelagic to date. The white supercilium broadens behind the eye, with a black marking going through the eye. The bird is also paler overall than Antarctic. Uncommon in our waters, the birds occurring here are most likely coming from Crozet and Kerguelen Island populations.</td>
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### Great-winged Petrel
**Pterodroma macroptera**
This is the most common Pterodroma petrel occurring off the KZN coast. This genus of petrels are commonly referred to as gadfly petrels. Great-winged Petrels are quite small, with narrow wings, and a distinct arcing flight. The bill is all black and stubby, the bird often described as bull-headed. The face often has a greyish tinge around the bill. The nominate species which occurs in our waters breeds on the southern ocean islands, unusually it breeds during the winter, therefore is more abundant on our summer trips.

### Soft-plumaged Petrel
**Pterodroma mollis**
These small hyperactive petrels have been seen off KZN between July and September. They have dark underwings, a white belly and chin, with a variable grey breast-band. Upperparts are grey with the upperwings being darker than the back. The flight is also dynamic and arcing, typical of this genus. The nominate species breed on Gough and Tristan da Cunha Islands.

### Barau’s Petrel
**Pterodroma baraui**
This spectacular bird was only recorded in our sub-region as recently as 2003. KZN sightings have all been between September and November. Again a dynamic flyer, they briefly visit chum slicks, usually when no larger petrels and albatrosses are present. The white underwing is distinct with its black carpal marking as shown in this photo. The underparts of the body are white. The head is black capped with a white forehead. Back and upperwings are dark grey with a darker grey tail, with a darker stripe heading from the tail to the carpal joint, ending in dark primaries on the upperwing. They only breed on Reunion Island and are currently on the red list as endangered.
Tahiti Petrel  
*Pseudobulweria rostrata*

In November 2018 we set out hoping to see a Barau’s Petrel on our last pelagic of the year. Little were we to know that we were going to lay eyes on a bird that breeds over 11,500km away on the islands off New Guinea. It was the first record for South Africa and the first confirmed in Southern African waters. The large bill, white belly and vent combined with dark brown chest, underwings and upperparts are features to look for.

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Grey Petrel  
*Procellaria cinerea*

This is a rare visitor this far north, our only sighting to date has been on a November trip. It is a large petrel, a touch smaller than the far more common White-chinned. It white underparts on the body, greyish underwings and grey upperparts. The complexly built bill (typical of petrels) is a pale yellowish colour. Another winter breeder, breeding at southern ocean colonies from March, departing in August.

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White-chinned Petrel  
*Procellaria aequinoctialis*

White-chinned Petrels are present throughout the year, but especially numerous in winter. It is a large dark chocolate brown bird, with a prominent pale bill. The white chin patch is variable but can sometimes extend in a ring around the head. These petrels breed on a number of southern ocean islands.

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Cory’s Shearwater  
*Calonectris borealis*

This is quite a distinctive shearwater with a white belly and underwings, tipped with dark primaries, the upperparts are brown – it shows no collar on the hind neck. The bill is mainly yellow with a dark tip. It is a summer visitor with our most of our records being mid to late summer, breeding on Azores, Madeira, Berlenga and Canary Islands.
| **Sooty Shearwater**  
  *Puffinus griseus*  
This small brown shearwater has long thin wings with distinctive silvery flashes to the underwing – its flight tends to be a series of flaps followed by a short glide, and repeated. The bill is a fleshy grey colour, as are the legs. They breed widely on South American and Australasian islands during the southern summer. |
| --- |
| **Flesh-footed Shearwater**  
  *Puffinus carneipes*  
Another small shearwater, sometimes abundant, other times a few birds attend the chum slick. It is light brown and a fair bit smaller than the White-chinned Petrels. The bill is pink with a dark tip, and the legs and feet are a distinct light pink. Our population likely comes from St. Paul Island. A summer breeder, but some of the population remain in KZN waters year round. |
| **Great Shearwater**  
  *Puffinus gravis*  
Slightly larger than Cory’s – this shearwaters white belly shows a dirty brown smudge, with dark smudges on the inner underwing. The dark cap is separated from the brown back by a white colour going around the hind neck, the rump also shows a white sickle. It then has a darker tail and primaries. They Breed on Nightingale, Inaccessible, Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island during summer. Uncommon in KZN waters in winter. |
| **Tropical Shearwater**  
  *Puffinus bailloni*  
This is a small black and white shearwater, with the upperparts being a crisp black, and the underparts, including sides of the neck being white. It has a shorter necked appearance than the larger Manx Shearwater. This is a very convoluted group of birds taxonomically, formally lumped under Audubon’s Shearwater. Our birds breed on Mascarene Island as well as Reunion. The Reunion birds differ in having white under tail coverts, as this photograph shows. It is uncommon off Durban, with our only records being from November 2014 and February 2016. |
**European Storm Petrel**  
*Hydrobates pelagicus*

European Storm Petrels are still regarded as a rarity in KZN waters. Our January and March trips in 2015 saw reasonable amounts of them mixed in with Wilson’s. The underwing shows a prominent white flash, the rest of the bird is brown with a prominent white rump. The feet when tucked up fall quite a bit short of the end of the tail. These birds breed in northern Europe in their summer, migrating south in the northern winter.

**Wilson’s Storm Petrel**  
*Oceanites oceanicus*

Arguably one of the most common true pelagic birds, these tiny Storm Petrels are identified by the white rumped brown body, and long legs, so that the feet protrude beyond the tail in flight. In worn plumage the upperwings show a paler line. Breeds widely, with the majority of our birds coming from the southern Atlantic islands.

**White-faced Storm Petrel**  
*Pelagodroma marina*

A much sought after bird in the sub region, we have only encountered them twice, in May 2014 and then June 2016. The white eyestripe, white belly and grey upperparts are quite distinct. The birds seen off KZN are probably from the nominate race, breeding on Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island.
### Black-bellied Storm Petrel

*Fregetta tropica*

Another KZN rarity, we were fortunate to see a fair number of these larger Storm Petrels on a May 2015 trip. The flight pattern is distinctly different to the two smaller storm petrels – the white belly is dissected vertically by a thin black line, not always easy to see out on the ocean, causing confusion with the rarer White-bellied Storm Petrel. Upperparts are dark brown with a white rump. They breed on the southern islands in our summer and move north in the winter. Most birds seen off our coast are passage migrants.

### Gulls, Terns and Noddies (*Laridae*)

#### Sabine’s Gull

*Xema sabini*

Another uncommon visitor to Natal waters, our first record was in January 2015. This small pelagic gull has a distinctive grey, black and white upperwing pattern as well as black and white tail pattern. They arrive in our waters in non breeding plumage. The Adult’s bill is tipped yellow, the immature birds have all black bills.

#### Slender-billed Gull

*Chroicocephalus genei*

This is put in “just in case”. David Allan has the honour of being the only person to have found this gull in the sub region, in Durban harbour. We therefore live in hope that one will pitch up on our routine scans of the central bank. It is smaller than Grey-headed Gull, with a thinner bill, which is orange to red in colour. (The photos were taken in Ethiopia)
| **Grey-headed Gull**  
| *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus*  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This is an immature bird, still showing brown feathers in the upperwing. Breeding adults have a distinct grey hood, with a red bill. Non breeding are similar to this bird, showing the black and white outerwing and remnants of the darker hood.</th>
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| **Franklin’s Gull**  
| *Larus pipixcan*  
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<tr>
<th>An uncommon visitor anywhere in the region, there are records from the harbour. The head is black in breeding plumage, with a very distinct white eyering. The upperwing is a mid range grey colour with a distinct white trailing edge and black tipped primaries. It is an American bird, migrating north to south in the northern winter. As the birds are partly pelagic, some of them tend to wander off course and end up down in South Africa.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Kelp Gull**  
| *Larus dominicanus*  
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<tr>
<th>This large gull is a common winter visitor, found mainly in and around the harbour. The adults are black and white, the immatures can cause a little confusion in their brown and white plumage, as per this photo.</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Lesser Black-backed Gull**  
| *Larus fuscus*  
| This uncommon visitor from the northern hemisphere is seen from time to time in the harbour – we scan the central bank for a chance of this rarity. Similarly coloured to a Kelp Gull, it is a little smaller, has a less robust bill, with a sloping forehead. The back is dark slate grey, not black as in Kelp Gull, and the legs are yellow as opposed to pink. |
| **Caspian Tern**  
*Hydroprogne caspia*  
There are often a few of these large terns hanging around the harbour, the large size and robust red bill are the best identifying features. |
|---|
| **Swift (Greater Crested) Tern**  
*Thalasseus bergii*  
This is the most common tern in the harbour, seen year round – a fairly large tern with a yellow bill. Adults are silvery grey above, immatures darker and flecked with brown and black feathers. Some birds do venture far out to sea as well. |
|---|
| **Lesser Crested Tern**  
*Thalasseus bengalensis*  
These summer migrants arrive late in the summer and most depart by autumn, though with unseasonally warm weather in 2015 we saw some into June. They are smaller than the Swift Terns with a thin slightly decurved orange bill. |
| **Sandwich Tern**  
*Thalasseus sandvicensis* |
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<tr>
<td>This is a very pale grey bird, larger than Common Terns, with a black bill tipped with yellow. Most sightings are close to the harbour or on the central bank.</td>
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| **Sooty Tern**  
*Onychoprion fuscatus* |
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<tr>
<td>These are the most numerous seabird in the world, however not too many venture into the shallower water, they feed out in the deep. The adults are jet black above, with white underparts, and a white triangle above the eye, not completely going over the eye. Bridled Tern is greyer above, a little smaller, and the white eyebrow extends over the eye. Young birds are sooty black all over, moulting into the adult black and white plumage as they age. The photo is of a bird transitioning into adult plumage.</td>
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| **Common Tern**  
*Sterna hirundo* |
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<tr>
<td>We often encounter these birds in the deep ocean. They are mostly in non breeding plumage so show a white forehead and often a black shoulder and leading edge to the wing. The bill is a dark red, appearing black – in breeding plumage the outer layer of the bill is shed and the bill is then red with a black tip. The rump is off white to grey, not contrasting too much with the grey back.</td>
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| **Arctic Tern**  
*Sterna paradisaea* |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shorter billed than the similar Common Tern, when seen well the rump is crisp white, contrasting with the grey back. The vast majority of these birds return to their arctic breeding grounds in our winter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Antarctic Tern
*Antarctic Tern*
*Sterna vittata*
Heavier billed (usually showing some red in non breeding plumage) than Common and Arctic Tern, with a dumpier jizz than those 2. They arrive in autumn in breeding plumage and leave in Spring. Quite uncommon in KZN waters.

### Skuas (Stercorariiidae)

#### Brown (Subantarctic) Skua
*Brown (Subantarctic) Skua*
*Stercorarius antarcticus*
Skuas are parasitic feeders, harassing other birds into regurgitating and dropping their food and then making off with their bounty. Brown Skuas look like big brown gulls, with distinctive white flashes at the base of the primary feathers. Our birds are mostly of the *lonnbergi* subspecies which breed on Marion Island. Indeed one colour tagged bird was traced back to the Gough Island colony.

#### Parasitic Jaeger
*Parasitic Jaeger*
*Stercorarius parasiticus*
Most birds encountered will be in non breeding plumage, but will still show a distinct white flash at the base of the primaries. They are slimmer than the chunky Pomarine Skuas but still larger than the more dainty Long-tailed Jaegers. They are summer visitors, they breed circumpolar in arctic regions.

#### Long-tailed Jaeger
*Long-tailed Jaeger*
*Stercorarius longicaudus*
These jaegers are uncommon off KZN, indeed no tagged birds have been known to round Cape point, so this was quite a sight in January 2015 – this was then followed up with a dozen breeding plumaged birds in May 2015. Most birds we see should as this photo be in non breeding plumage. There is no evident white flash, the quills of the leading primary feathers are white. The trailing edge of the wing contrasts, being noticeably black. Summer visitors, they breed circumpolar in high arctic regions.
Information for pelagic trips

The boat, (usually Spirit of Elan, but subject to change) is moored at Wilson’s Wharf. We meet in the carpark, ready to move across to the boat by 05h30. (Possibly earlier in summer, but you will be advised of this.)

Map to Wilson’s Wharf

Preparation for the trip:

You will need to arrange your own accommodation around the Durban area, bearing in mind that you need to be at the pier very early on the morning of departure, as we want to make best use of the available daylight and depart at first light. The boat will return around 14h00 but can be delayed for various reasons, so if you are booking flights, bear this in mind.

The deckhand will make us coffee and tea when we get on board, otherwise you should bring along refreshments and snacks if you feel you will require during the day. A cash bar is on board serving water, cool drinks and alcoholic beverages – please remember to settle your tab before disembarking.

Anti seasickness measures are recommended, pills such as Sturgeron usually do the trick. Make sure you are dressed for the occasion - sunscreen should be used, even on cloudy days, a cap that won't blow away, and rainproof/windproof jacket as it can get quite cool out at sea.
The boat is a twin hulled fishing boat, with a spacious cabin to store your bags. Outside, seating is available upstairs and downstairs, as well as on the front deck in calm weather. There are two toilets on board.

Please note the trip can move to the Sunday (providing the boat is available) if weather conditions are deemed too bad for it to be safe to venture out to sea on the Saturday, therefore allow the weekend for the trip. The trip may even be cancelled completely, this is obviously totally out of our hands, and safety always comes first. The skipper checks the forecasts during the week and we try and finalise arrangements by Wednesday afternoon prior to the weekend, however as weather can change radically from hour to hour this should not be taken as gospel that the trip will go ahead, should conditions change overnight it can result in a complete cancellation.

Payment for the trip is due a month before the trip - cancellation in the last week before the trip, or a "no show" will result in your payment being forfeited.

Your hosts:

Niall Perrins arranges the trips, and together with Dave Rimmer, will try and make your trip as enjoyable and productive as possible.

Contact details:

Niall Perrins  niall@kitech.co.za  083 657-5511
Dave Rimmer:  daverimmer@mweb.co.za  082 453-7255

The schedule of trips and availability of places is on Niall’s website:
http://www.niall.co.za/pelagic/KZNpelagictrips.htm