

Short-tailed Shearwater

Ardenna tenuirostris

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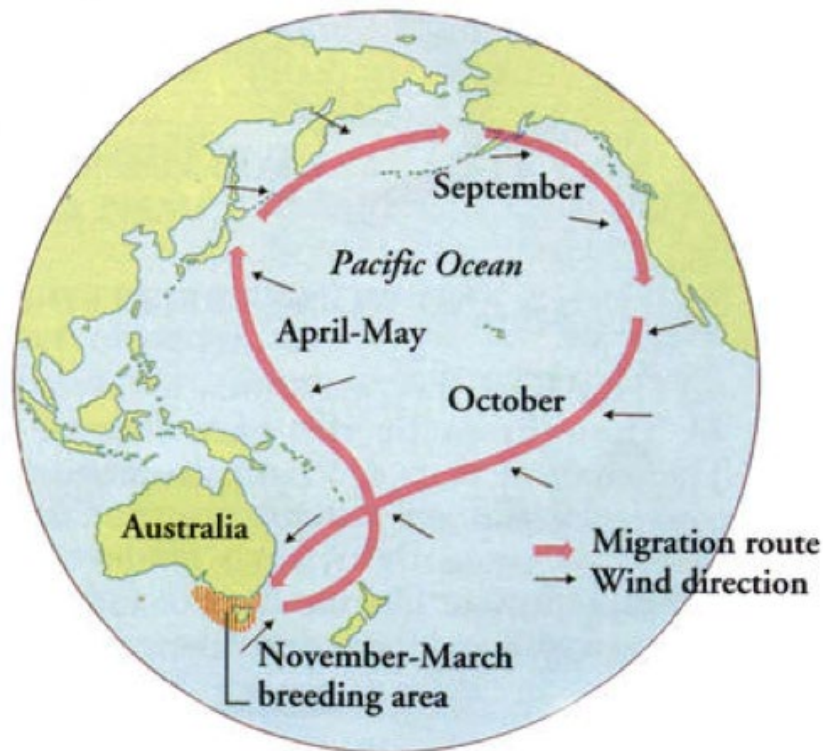
A Short-tailed Shearwater off Port Stephens – note the bird's trailing feet (photo: Mick Roderick)

This is a mid-sized seabird, all dark including dark legs and a darkish bill and having the typical masterful flight exhibited by all shearwaters. The underwing is dark but often has paler patches, which in fresh plumage can appear silvery-white, reminiscent of the closely-related Sooty Shearwater. Sooty Shearwater is the main potential confusion species (NB they are uncommon in our region). In flight a Short-tailed Shearwater's legs trail marginally beyond the tail – but that is not an easy field feature unless able to obtain good close-up views. A better indicator is the bird's flight pattern – a series of rhythmic arcs interspersed with short bouts of rapid wing beats.

Migration

Short-tailed Shearwater are migratory ocean birds, that breed in southern Australia. They have a lifespan of 15-20 years, but sometimes can live considerably longer (to 35+ years). Population estimates vary but mostly are in the range 20-40 million birds – it probably is Australia's most populous bird species.

Each austral winter, they migrate to the seas off the Aleutian Islands and Kamchatka. In the austral spring, they travel down the coast of California before crossing the Pacific back to Australia.



Short-tailed Shearwater annual migration (map is from <https://www.ecosplat.co.nz>)

Regional Status

The Short-tailed Shearwater is a breeding visitor and bird of passage in the Hunter Region. Between summer and early autumn, there are regular offshore sightings of small numbers of them. However, in spring and sometimes beginning from late August, large numbers regularly pass through our waters on their way to their breeding grounds in southern Australia. For example, in November 2017, a pelagic survey estimated that c10,000 birds per hour were

passing through.

In spring/summer, some of them breed on offshore islands within our region. For example a few hundred pairs breed on Broughton Island (compared with 60,000-80,000 pairs of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters) and about 400 pairs on Little Broughton Island (with 3,000 or so pairs of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters). The main breeding sites for Short-tailed Shearwaters are much further south.

There have been several April records (of low numbers of birds) and one winter record (of a single bird).



Short-tailed Shearwater off Tasmania, with slender bill and trailing legs (Photo: Dick Jenkin)

Wrecks

Occasionally, arising from adverse conditions at sea, large wrecks occur on our beaches during the migration passage. Sometimes those wrecks involve thousands if not tens of thousands of birds. For example, in November 2013 it was estimated that there were 60-80,000 dead and dying Short-tailed Shearwaters on our beaches. Similar events happened in 1995, 2000 and 2009. Each time, those wrecks happened all along the eastern seaboard.

The main cause of death is emaciation – i.e. the birds starved to death. Even in normal years, birds usually are very hungry during their migration passage and they will readily approach a boat in order to obtain food. They have flown long distances, which is very energy-demanding. It does not take much of a disruption (i.e. adverse conditions) for some of them to get into trouble.

The sizes of the wrecks i.e. sometimes upwards of 50,000 birds, may seem alarming especially when one encounters a wreck. But the context is that those wrecks typically involve only 0.1-0.2% of the total population.

Muttonbirds

Various shearwater species are known as “muttonbirds” but the Short-tailed Shearwater epitomises the name, because of the numbers involved.

Thousands of young birds are taken for food each year in southern Australia, especially at places such as the Furneaux Islands in Bass Strait and various other islands off Tasmania.

The term muttonbird is applied to seabirds, especially shearwaters, whose young are harvested for food and other uses before they fledge. The term originally emerged among settlers on Norfolk Island as the strong taste and fattiness of these birds' meat was likened to mutton.

Although inhabitants nowadays of southern Australian islands have far more pleasant types of meat available to them, muttonbird harvesting continues to be practised at many locations, under strictly-controlled licences.

About the name

Short-tailed Shearwater

“Short-tailed” is descriptive; the bird’s tail is shorter than those of many other shearwaters of the same genus (~80 mm compared with ~130mm for Wedge-tailed Shearwater and ~90mm for Sooty Shearwater). “Shearwater”, a term first used by the English biologist John Ray in the 17th Century, also is descriptive, all species of this genus exhibit superbly controlled flight often with a wing tip almost cutting the water.

Ardenna tenuirostris

The species name means ‘slender-billed’, from the Latin words *tenuis*, slender, and *rostrum*, bill. The genus name *Ardenna* stems from *Artenna*,

which is the name used for Cory's Shearwater by inhabitants of the Tremeti Islands (in the Adriatic Sea). Somewhere down the line, the "t" became a "d". Cory's Shearwaters have bred on those islands for hundreds of years.



Short-tailed Shearwater off Tasmania, with silvery underwings (Photo: Dick Jenkin)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names

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