



## **In the Wake of the Bounty: Pitcairn, Henderson and islands of Eastern French Polynesia**

**3-19 November 2014**

Text and photos by Chris Collins, Tour Leader

### **Trip report**

This was the first WildWings trip to this poorly known and rarely visited region and despite some atypical weather, the expedition was a great success with all the expected land endemics and seabirds being seen.

The star bird was surely the endearing Tuamotu Sandpiper and we were privileged to see this charismatic species on Tenararo and Morane Islands. Although it is believed that the world population is about 1,300 birds which are found across just five atolls, we saw good numbers on both islands.

Our tour, however, began on Tahiti and shortly after the group had assembled at our very pleasant beachside hotel, we spent our first afternoon together visiting the Papenoo Valley. Here we found the first endemics of the trip with nice looks at Tahiti Kingfisher, Grey-green Fruit Dove and Tahiti Reed Warbler.

The following morning, we were at the airport shortly after first light for our flight to the remote Gambier Archipelago in the far east of French Polynesia and after chugging across the lagoon on the inter-island ferry to the main island of Mangareva, we were met by the crew of *Braveheart* and were soon aboard our home for the next couple of weeks.



### **Christmas Shearwater**

#### ***Motu Teiko November 2014***

After our skipper Matt Jolly had completed the customs and immigration clearance, we left the wharf and were soon approaching the small island of Motu Teiko. As the sun slowly set, we enjoyed some fantastic looks at both Christmas and Tropical Shearwaters, as they wheeled around the islet before landing to visit their burrows. Our skipper Matt gave us an

impressive demonstration of his skill as captain, bringing *Braveheart* really close inshore so we could get the best of this amazing experience.

The following day we were at sea and although tropical seabirding can be extremely quiet at times, our day was highly successful with some great looks at Titan Storm-petrel. Although this taxon is currently regarded as a subspecies of White-bellied Storm-petrel, it is c.15% larger than all other subspecies and is probably better treated as a good species in its own right with this, for example, acknowledged in the most recent HBW updates.

Believed to be an endemic breeder on the remote island of Rapa (in the extreme south of French Polynesia), where there are only a few hundred pairs, we had some stunning views, with the bird coming in close to the stern of *Braveheart*. Subsequent examination of photos confirmed that it showed the diagnostic fine streaking on the flanks and the grey scalloping on the back. A real bonus and something which very few other birders had been lucky enough to encounter.

In some respects, however, the bigger surprise was the number of Juan Fernandez Petrel we saw with A logged during the day. Indeed, we would see this species on eight subsequent days making it amongst the more frequently encountered *Pterodromas* on the trip.



The following day (6 November) we were ashore on Pitcairn, made famous by the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1790. As well as meeting the descendants of some of the mutineers, we were primarily interested in seeing the endemic reed warbler and this task was quickly achieved.

### **Pitcairn Reed Warbler**

#### ***Pitcairn Island, November 2014***

With another expedition ship due to be at Henderson Island on 8 November (our first scheduled day there), Chris and Matt reorganised the itinerary and we headed there straight from Pitcairn.

The unseasonal weather continued, however, and the sea state meant it was impossible to get ashore on North Beach (the better birding landing) so we eventually succeeded on landing on West Beach.

With far from ideal conditions and only a limited amount of habitat to explore, it proved to be a challenge to find our main targets but we persevered and were rewarded with Henderson Reed Warbler, Stephen's Lorikeet and finally a Henderson Island Fruit Dove. The most desired endemic, however, was the flightless crane and despite much searching for this 'must see' species, we were unable to find it.

With the weather deteriorating and the seas building, the ride back to the ship was extremely damp for some of the group, but we all got back safely to *Braveheart* thanks to the excellent boat handling skills of our skipper Matt and his amazing jet boat.

## **Murphy's Petrel**

### ***Henderson Island, November 2014***

As another expedition ship was scheduled to visit Henderson Island the following day (8 November) we headed for a seamount approximately 20 nautical miles away, but the weather was dire and the suggestion that the clothing for this trip would primarily be 't-shirts and shorts' was



certainly not the case today !!! Nevertheless, we had a decent day at sea with a variety of petrels being recorded including Tahiti, Kermadec, Herald and Murphy's, as well as good numbers of the endemic Henderson Petrel. For many of the group, the highlight was a Polynesian Storm-petrel, a bird with a wide distribution across the tropical Pacific but never easy to see.

The following day saw us back at Henderson Island anticipating a day on the ship as the weather had barely improved, but as we rounded the north-west corner of the island, Matt told Chris that he thought he might be able to get us ashore. As a result, everyone rapidly readied their gear and we were soon ashore at the premiere place on Henderson for the endemics. We were more or less greeted by a reasonably obliging Fruit Dove and there were several Henderson Reed Warblers too, but the bird everyone was desperate to see was the crake and there was no sign of it in the forest immediately behind our beach landing site.



## **Henderson Reed Warbler**

### ***Henderson Island, November 2014***

With the sea conditions remaining marginal and the possibility of Matt calling us back to the landing site at any time, we took the decision to take the steep trail to the top of the plateau knowing that this final endemic was usually easier there. The climb was far from easy but everyone got to the top and having selected a decent looking spot, we formed a tight group in the hope that a crake would cross the trail which led across the island.

After several minutes, Chris looked over his shoulder and there watching us was a somewhat bemused crake less than 10 feet away !!!! Very slowly everyone repositioned and the bird gave us some nice views, although getting cameras to focus through the undergrowth proved to be somewhat challenging. Nevertheless, our goal had been to see this highly endangered bird and this job had been successfully achieved, so whilst some of the group went further along the trail in the hope of finding another crake, others went back and searched for the spectacular Stephen's Lorikeet.

All too soon the radio message came through from Matt that he wanted us back at the landing site but we had now all seen all the endemics and everyone went back to the ship highly satisfied with their time on the island.

With no need to depart immediately for our next destination, we headed for the seamount we had visited the day before and had what was undoubtedly the best tropical chumming session any of us had ever experienced, with an incredible range of petrels being seen over the course of the afternoon. As well as Murphy's, Kermadec, Herald and Henderson Petrels, we also saw Phoenix Petrel and Black Petrel and then in an almost crazy period that cannot have lasted more than 20 minutes, Stejneger's, Gould's and Cook's Petrels all came in to the slick. The cameras went into overdrive as the birds came through but all species were photographed and it was incredible to realise that we were watching species which bred as far away as the Hauraki Gulf in New Zealand and the Juan Fernandez Islands off Chile !!!!



**Stejneger's Petrel (left) and  
Cook's Petrel (right)**

*Henderson Seamount*

*November 2014*

The following morning we arrived offshore from Oeno Island but any hopes of getting ashore were dashed, as the unseasonal weather had returned with a vengeance and with the weather charts not looking promising for the next 24 hours, Chris and Matt took the decision to head off and hope for better conditions further west.

Whilst chumming over the Portland Bank and offshore from the southern end of the Gambier Islands was undeniably quiet, the following day ended with us returning to Motu Teiko for more looks at the Christmas and Tropical Shearwaters with the nice bonus of three Blue Noddies. Although the taxonomy of the 'Blue-grey Noddies' remains somewhat confused, photos clearly showed that these birds were relatively dark and had uniform underwings.

After enjoying the Christmas and Tropical Shearwaters until the light had gone, we left the Gambier Lagoon and Matt set a course for Tenararo Island and by mid-morning of 12 November the island was in sight. It appeared that we had finally left behind the inclement weather which had dogged us during the first part of the trip and were soon ashore on what would prove to be a truly idyllic tropical atoll.

We had three targets here and two of these were secured almost immediately with Tuamotu Sandpiper more or less at our feet as soon as we had got ashore. These incredible little birds seemed utterly fearless and we were able to enjoy some stupendous views as they seemed as

interested in us as we were in them. It was a real privilege to see this delightful bird, although at the same time it was somewhat sobering to think that it now occurs on so few islands and that if rats or other predators were to get ashore, the population could be decimated almost overnight.



**Tuamotu Sandpiper (left) and Atoll Fruit Dove *Tenararo Island, November 2014***

As well as the sandpipers, there were Atoll Fruit Doves on the beach and in the adjacent coconut groves, but the other species we were particularly keen to see was the critically endangered Polynesian Ground Dove. Matt and his team had suggested that this species was generally easier to find in the forest on the lagoon side of the atoll and splitting into a number of small groups, we began to explore the island in the hope of finding this key species. Fortunately, everyone was successful and over the course of the afternoon we found at least 21 separate individuals of this extremely handsome dove. With the world population thought to potentially number just 100 birds, between us we saw over 20% of this total in a single day.



**Polynesian Ground Dove *Tenararo Island, November 2014***

The following day we had another morning ashore on Tenararo and with everyone having seen all the key birds, some chose to enjoy the sandpipers, whilst other either went searching for more ground doves or explored along the beach where twenty or so Bristle-thighed Curlews were seen. The final option was to go snorkelling and many of the group enjoyed this experience seeing a fantastic range of corals and fish, with a lucky few having a close encounter with two turtles.

After a rather quiet afternoon chumming at a seamount to the south-west of Tenararo which the nautical chart suggested came up to 225 metres below the surface but the highest point we could find was 775m (a typo on the chart ??), we headed south for the final island of our expedition, the remote atoll of Morane.

With the weather continuing to be kind to us, getting ashore across the jagged coral was not too problematic (albeit that almost everyone got wet to at least the knees) and we soon set off to explore, with many of the group starting off by visiting a small forest patch where there was an excellent range of breeding seabirds. There were lots of fluffy chicks including Great Frigatebirds and Brown Noddies, as well as young Red-tailed Tropicbirds, Murphy's Petrels and Masked Boobies. We also found a nest of Tuamotu Sandpipers before setting off to explore the largest forest patch on the island.



**Great Frigatebird *Morane Island, November 2014***

The vegetation here, however, was extremely thick and the serrated edges to the Pandanus leaves meant bush bashing was not really practical, so most of the group elected to explore along the beach of this magical coral paradise, where we found Bristle-thighed Curlews, more Tuamato Sandpipers and some incredibly close Black-tipped Reef Sharks which were cruising along only a few feet off the shoreline.

With the sun beating down, we were finally experiencing the conditions we had expected and many of the group congregated in the shade for a pleasant afternoon siesta before heading back to the landing site in the late afternoon.



### **Bristle-thighed Curlew**

*Morane Island, November 2014*

As the wind had increased in strength whilst we were ashore, it was another somewhat challenging (and wet) experience getting back across the coral to the jet boat but by 6pm everyone was safely aboard *Braveheart* after a fantastic day on yet another paradise island.

With the swells building during the night, the dawn inspection of the potential landing sites on Morane confirmed that we would be unable to get ashore again

but this did not mean we could not go snorkelling, so many of the group elected to get into the water and explore the underwater world. As at Tenararo, there was plenty to see, with an excellent range of fish and corals, with two of the group having a close encounter with a friendly Black-tipped Reef Shark.

By late morning (of 15 November), we headed off to a seamount approximately 20 nautical miles to the WNW of Morane in the hope of finding some more seabirds. Whilst the chumming session proved to be rather quiet, we finally saw our third Polynesian Storm-petrel of the expedition which put in an all too brief appearance off the stern of the ship.

### **Polynesian Storm-petrel**

*nr Morane Island, November 2014*

After dark we returned to Morane Island and drifted offshore overnight and at dawn the following day Chris and Matt checked the shore to see if it might be possible to make a last landing. With large waves crashing ashore, this was clearly going to be impossible, so shortly after 6am, Matt set a course for Mangareva.

An afternoon chumming session was once again rather quiet with only Murphy's Petrels and a couple of Tropical Shearwaters being seen so we continued onwards towards Mangareva.



At dawn on 17 November, we began our last chum of the expedition and whilst the birding was again somewhat thin, we enjoyed some spectacular views of a pod of Blainville's Beaked Whales which spent about a quarter of an hour making repeated passes of the stern of the ship. Prolonged encounters with beaked whales anywhere in the world are rarely as good as this and we saw breaching and tail slapping – a truly unique experience !!!!

By early afternoon, *Braveheart* was alongside at Mangareva and many of the group took the opportunity to explore the island. We could only ponder on what endemic species must have once occurred on the Gambier Islands but with the arrival of man and predators such as rats,

cats and dogs, whatever unique avifauna that had once existed here was long gone and the only birds of note that we found were Wandering Tattlers, Pacific Golden Plovers, Pacific Reef Herons and both White and Great Crested Terns.



### **Blainville's Beaked Whales off Gambier Archipelago November 2014**

After a final night on *Braveheart*, the day began with more torrential rain and the wind blowing at 30+ knots. With such unpleasant conditions outside, many of the group spent the morning aboard but by late morning it was time to say goodbye to our fantastic crew and take the ferry for the 40 minute ride across the lagoon to the airport.

The vile conditions eventually relented just as it was time to get on the plane and 4 hours later we had landed on a rather humid Tahiti. French Polynesia really was huge.....

The following morning, we set off for the Papahue Valley to look for our final targets of the trip. Initially things did not go too well as our local guide was badly delayed and we then had to walk a kilometre as the road was impassable for our oversized bus. When we finally arrived at the entrance to the reserve, however, the first of the endemics we were looking for, Tahiti Swiftlet, was almost immediately spotted. The birds were wheeling high above us along the top of the forested valley and whilst our views were initially somewhat distant, nevertheless, we now had only one endemic to find, the critically endangered Tahiti Monarch.

Our local guide was the perfect person to show us this species (as he spent most days monitoring the birds) and after walking along a forested trail for about a kilometre, fording a stream, we stopped beneath a substantial tree and a nest was pointed out to us. Initially, all we could see was a black tail but the pair swapped over on a regular basis and this allowed us to get some decent looks at this incredibly rare bird which is now believed to number just fifty or so individuals. Without local assistance, we would have stood no chance of finding this mega rarity.

Whilst it was a somewhat neck straining experience to look up into the canopy, we all got some nice looks at the birds before moving on to a different nest where viewing was somewhat easier. This nest had been built by two younger birds and there was believed to be no egg, so despite waiting for over half an hour, only a couple of the group got the briefest of views.

By mid-morning and with the temperature rising, many took up the offer of a cold drink from an extremely friendly local lady who lived in the valley and had joined us on our excursion.



Despite residing within a mile of the birds, she had not previously seen the monarch – it was gratifying that our visit had clearly inspired her and she generously invited us into her home for fruit juice and freshly picked bananas.

After enjoying the welcomed hospitality, we walked back towards our bus seeing many of the introduced species of Tahiti including Crimson-backed Tanager, a species we had missed on our previous excursion.

After a leisurely afternoon at our hotel, we were picked up mid-evening for our transfer to the airport and our trip was sadly drawing to a close. We had been extremely privileged to see some incredible birds and despite inclement weather and some quiet chumming sessions, we had seen all likely species plus a number of real bonus birds – definitely a highly successful trip.



***Braveheart off Tenararo Island, November 2014***

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### **Systematic List**

The taxonomy and English names used in this list generally follow the recommendations of the *International Ornithologists' Union's World Bird List* (formerly IOC), with revisions made where an alternative name/taxonomy is considered more appropriate.

This systematic list was compiled by Chris Collins (based on the figures agreed at the nightly logs) and includes all species recorded during the birding excursions on Tahiti (3 and 19 November) and our two week voyage on *Braveheart*.

Accurately counting seabirds at sea is extremely difficult (eg as one can never be sure which birds are following or revisiting the ship), so the system outlined below was adopted, with this also used for the more numerous landbirds:

1-10 = actual number seen

11-100 = A

101-1,000 = B

1,001-10,000 = C

10,001-100,000 = D

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### **BIRDS**

#### **Pacific Black Duck    *Anas superciliosa***

A pair with four ducklings was found in Papenoo Valley (3 November) on Tahiti.

#### **Buller's Albatross    *Thalassarche bulleri***

A single bird was seen whilst cruising from Mangareva to Pitcairn on 5 November. This was the only albatross which was identified to species level, with a brief and distant bird on 8 November (at sea near Henderson Island) not being specifically identified.

### **Murphy's Petrel    *Pterodroma ultima***

The most regularly recorded *Pterodroma* of the expedition, with sightings on a daily basis whilst we were on *Braveheart*. The highest counts were offshore from Henderson Island (8-9 November) when a low B was logged.

### **Juan Fernandez Petrel    *Pterodroma externa***

One of the more surprising aspects of the trip was the number of Juan Fernandez Petrels seen during our time on *Braveheart* with sightings on eight days. The highest count was whilst at sea cruising from Mangareva to Pitcairn (5 November) when A was logged, with low single figure counts on all other occasions.

As its name suggests, this handsome looking species is an endemic breeder on the Juan Fernandez Islands and Mangareva is over 5,300 kilometres from the island of Alejandro Selkirk where the birds nest. Juan Fernandez Petrels typically begin breeding in December, so presumably the individuals we were seeing were either non-breeders or birds which were in the process of migrating back towards their breeding grounds.

### **Kermadec Petrel    *Pterodroma neglecta***

Although this species is generally outnumbered by Herald Petrels in the Central Pacific, somewhat unexpectedly, we only saw six individuals with three on both 8 and 9 November (offshore from Henderson Island).

### **Herald Petrel    *Pterodroma heraldica***

This species was seen on four dates with the highest count (A) being logged offshore from Henderson Island on 8 November.

### **Henderson Petrel    *Pterodroma atrata***

Until relatively recently, this species was considered to be a dark morph of Herald Petrel, however, it has now been confirmed to be a full species in its own right. As far as is currently known, it is an endemic breeder to Henderson Island and our highest counts were around the island, with a low B (comfortably over 100 individuals) recorded on both 8 and 9 November. The only other sightings were six birds the previous day and a lone individual whilst cruising from Mangareva to Pitcairn on 5 November.

### **Phoenix Petrel    *Pterodroma alba***

This species appears to be genuinely rare in the waters we visited. Although there is certainly confusion in some of the ornithological literature about separating it from Herald Petrel, we saw two birds on 9 November which were perfect for this species showing dark underwings and lores and small white throats.

### **Black-winged Petrel    *Pterodroma nigripennis***

At least one bird was seen and photographed during the chumming session at a seamount approximately 20 nautical miles to the WNW of Morane Island on 15 November. The following day, a further three individuals were spotted (cruising from Morane to Mangareva) with one at the final chumming session on the morning of 17 November.

Although the vast majority of the population are believed to breed in the West Pacific (eg New Caledonia, islands off Australia and the Kermadec Islands), some birds are also known to breed on the island of Rapa in southern French Polynesia and it is possible, therefore, that

the birds we encountered were actually reasonably local breeders rather than longer distance migrants.

### **Gould's Petrel    *Pterodroma leucoptera***

One of the more surprising sightings of the expedition was a lone petrel which was seen at the seamount to the WNW of Henderson Island on 9 November. Although on range Collared Petrel would be more likely than Gould's Petrels, photos of this bird showed plumage features confirming it was a Gould's Petrel.

### **Cook's Petrel    *Pterodroma cookii***

Another of the species which was seen and photographed during the stunning chumming session at the seamount off the WNW of Henderson Island on 9 November with two different individuals recorded. Another bird was then seen the following day whilst cruising westwards from Oeno Island.

The majority of the population of this species breeds on Little Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf (New Zealand) with eggs generally laid between October and December, so it is likely that the birds we saw were non-breeders.

### **Stejneger's Petrel    *Pterodroma longirostris***

Amongst the more unexpected (but much appreciated !!) sightings on the chum slick WNW of Henderson (9 November) was a lone Stejneger's Petrel which made an all too brief appearance. Unfortunately, the bird only stayed for a matter of moments but photos confirmed the identification of this species which is only known to breed in the mountains on the island of Alejandro Selkirk in the Juan Fernandez Archipelago.

It is generally considered that after leaving their breeding grounds, Stejneger's Petrels move in a north-westerly direction (ie towards Japan), so this record is certainly noteworthy, although the species has recently been recorded off Eastern Australia.

### **Tahiti Petrel    *Pseudobulweria rostrata***

Despite its name, this species was surprisingly uncommon with sightings on only two dates (8 November: 3 individuals and 15 November: 1 individual).

### **Black Petrel    *Procellaria parkinsoni***

The only record was a brief flyby on the chum slick WNW of Henderson Island on 9 November.

### **Wedge-tailed Shearwater    *Puffinus pacificus***

A total of eight birds were logged with three not far from Pitcairn (6 November) and five off the southern end of the Gambier Archipelago (11 November).

### **Sooty Shearwater    *Puffinus griseus***

The only confirmed sighting was a lone bird flying south whilst we were chumming off the NW corner of the Gambier Archipelago (17 November). Another large brown *puffinus* shearwater was seen briefly the previous day but Short-tailed Shearwater could not be ruled out due to the brevity of the sighting.

### **Christmas Shearwater    *Puffinus nativitatis***

The undoubted highlight of our first evening on *Braveheart* (4 November) was some fantastic views of this infrequently seen shearwater at Motu Teiko (within the Gambier Archipelago) where A was logged. We returned to the same location on the evening of 11 November where we had a similar ‘show’, as the birds flew around this small predator-free island.

There were also sightings on five other dates during the voyage but all counts were in low single figures.

### **Atoll (Tropical) Shearwater    *Puffinus (bailloni) dichrous***

Like the Christmas Shearwater, this species breeds on Motu Teiko and birds were seen on both visits (4 and 11 November) although in smaller numbers than the Christmas Shearwaters. The only other sightings were on the last two days at sea on *Braveheart* (16 and 17 November) when a total of five birds were seen.

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

A very brief sighting on 5 November whilst cruising from Mangareva to Pitcairn was the only record on the expedition.

### **Titan (White-bellied) Storm Petrel    *Fregetta (grallaria) titan***

This putative split is significantly larger than ‘normal’ White-bellied Storm-petrels and a single bird was seen on 5 November whilst cruising from Mangareva to Pitcairn. The bird showed well off the stern of the ship for a few moments and subsequent examination of photos showed that it did indeed have the diagnostic flank streaking and scalloping of this rarely seen taxon.

### **Polynesian Storm Petrel    *Nesofregetta fuliginosa***

Undoubtedly one of the ‘most wanted’ seabirds of the trip with three birds being recorded. The first of these was well seen near the seamount approximately 20 nautical miles WNW of Henderson Island on 8 November, with another individual then sighted the following day. The final record was a bird which put in a brief appearance at the end of an extended chumming session off Morane (15 November).

Although this species has a wide distribution in the Pacific with the most westerly breeding sites thought to be around New Caledonia and the most easterly at Sala y Gomez, this species is categorised as ‘endangered’ by Birdlife International due to the presence of introduced predators on many of the islands it breeds on. The world population is estimated at 1,500-2,400 individuals, although it is acknowledged that ‘data is lacking and a comprehensive survey needs to be conducted’ (per Birdlife International website).

### **Red-tailed Tropicbird    *Phaethon rubricauda***

Far more common than White-tailed Tropicbird with sightings on an almost daily basis during our time on *Braveheart*. The highest count was on 14 November when we visited Morane where a number of nests with well-developed chicks were found and the total count for the day was estimated as a high A (ie approaching 100 individuals).

### **White-tailed Tropicbird    *Phaethon lepturus***

This species was only recorded on Tahiti with a low A logged on 3 November and smaller numbers on 19 November.

### **Pacific Reef Heron    *Egretta sacra***

First seen during our excursion to Papenoo Valley (3 November) on Tahiti where this species is relatively numerous with a low A logged. This included a mixture of dark and white morph individuals.

It was then seen on both Tenararo and Morane Islands (12-15 November) and at Mangareva (17-18 November), although all counts were in low single figures.

### **Great Frigatebird    *Fregata minor***

Significantly commoner than Lesser Frigatebird with sightings on almost every day of the voyage on *Braveheart*. The highest count was off Oeno Island (10 November) when a low B was logged, although a high A was also recorded on 4 other occasions.

### **Lesser Frigatebird    *Fregata ariel***

This species was only recorded on five days with a total of six individuals seen. Although it is highly likely there were other individuals in some of the larger groups of frigatebirds, it is clearly a much less numerous species in the Central Pacific than Great Frigatebird.

### **Masked Booby    *Sula dactylatra***

This species was first seen on 6 November when cruising back to *Braveheart* on the Pitcairn longboat after our day ashore on the island, with three individuals seen on a small offshore stack close to the landing site. It was then encountered on a daily basis for the rest of our time aboard, although generally in relatively low numbers with either A or a single figure count on twelve occasions.

It is worth noting that the birds seen on this trip differ from those around Lord Howe, Norfolk Island and the Kermadecs where they have brown eyes and a somewhat different range of plumages prior to reaching adulthood. There are suggestions that these birds should be split as 'Tasman Boobies', in which case there would be three species in the Pacific which until recently were all regarded as subspecies, ie Nazca Booby (Galapagos and a few other islands off Ecuador), Masked Booby and Tasman Booby.

### **Red-footed Booby    *Sula sula***

The commonest booby species on the expedition with sightings on an almost daily basis whilst we were aboard *Braveheart*. The highest numbers were recorded around Henderson Island and nearby waters with a low B (ie over 100 individuals) on 9 November.

### **Brown Booby    *Sula leucogaster***

By far the least common booby in Eastern French Polynesia and the other islands we explored with a total of 21 individuals recorded across six dates.

### **Swamp Harrier    *Circus approximans***

The only regular bird of prey on Tahiti and seen in small numbers on all dates.

This species is one of those which is impacting on the critically endangered Tahiti Monarch and as a result, birds at Papahue Valley are being 'controlled' (ie shot) to reduce the potential impact on the monarchs.

### **Henderson Crane    *Porzana atra***

One of the most wanted birds on the entire trip and a lone bird was enjoyed by the group on the plateau on Henderson Island (9 November).

This is one of the species which it had been hoped would benefit from the rat eradication programme, however, with this having failed and the number of rats now seemingly higher than before, it seems that the number of cranes may currently be lower than previously. We can only hope that there is a successful follow-up programme to eliminate the rats.....

Given Pacific Rats were introduced on Henderson Island, it is interesting to wonder how this crane was able to survive when on other Pacific Islands, it is believed that up to 1,000 species of birds became extinct as the Polynesian people spread across the Pacific.

### **Pacific Golden Plover    *Pluvialis fulva***

Only seen in very small numbers with sightings on five dates with most of these observed within the Gambier Archipelago (3, 17 and 18 November). The only birds recorded during our time on *Braveheart* were lone birds on both Henderson and Morane Islands (9 and 14 November).

### **Bristle-thighed Curlew    *Numenius tahitiensis***

After Tuamotu Sandpiper, this species was probably the next most 'wanted' wader of the expedition and we saw birds on Henderson (7 and 9 November), Tenararo (12-13 November) and Morane (14 November). The highest counts were on Tenararo where c.20 birds were recorded on both days we were ashore.

This species is surely one of the world's most extraordinary navigators and one can only marvel at how birds can fly from their Alaskan breeding grounds to small islands such as Henderson – a journey of over 9,500 kilometres.

### **Wandering Tattler    *Tringa incana***

This species was seen in small numbers on eleven days with the first sightings being 2+ birds on the river in the upper reaches of the Papenoo Valley on Tahiti (3 November). It was then recorded on all the islands we visited, with the highest count being on Pitcairn where nine birds were logged.

### **Tuamotu Sandpiper    *Prosobonia parvirostris***

For many of the group, this was their 'bird of the trip' and we saw good numbers (A to high A) on both Tenararo (12-13 November) and the following day on Morane. It was a truly magical experience to wander along the shoreline and through the forest and have birds come and investigate us, seemingly as curious at our presence as we were of them.

According to Birdlife International, this species is believed to only occur on five islands. The total population is estimated to number at least 1,300 individuals, although the species is thought to be declining. The major strongholds are Morane and Tenararo, with c.500 birds on both these atolls, ie c.80% of the total population.

Although the diet of this species is described as including seeds, insects, plant material and nectar, the birds we saw seemed to spend a lot of time consuming the latter and we found several individuals with pollen at the base of their bills. As the flowers they were feeding on are presumably indigenous, it is interesting to speculate if there is a symbiotic relation between the birds and this plant given the general lack of pollinating insects.

**Brown Noddy    *Anous stolidus***

The commonest species of Noddy on the trip with sightings on an almost daily basis. On the vast majority of occasions, the daily estimate was A, although we logged B on four occasions, with the highest numbers around Henderson Island (8-9 November).

**Black Noddy    *Anous minutus***

This species was recorded on twelve dates, although on all bar two occasions, the number logged was in single figures, ie it was significantly less common than Brown Noddy. The only places where reasonable numbers were seen were around Pitcairn (6 November) and south of the Gambier Archipelago (11 November) where A was noted.

**Blue Noddy    *Procelsterna cerulea***

Three birds were seen and photographed south of Motu Teiko, Gambier Archipelago on 11 November.

Although this species is closely related to Grey Noddy and has previously been considered conspecific with it, the two are now generally regarded as distinct, with consistent differences in colour and size being the primary differences.

**Grey Noddy    *Procelsterna albivitta***

This species was reasonably numerous around Pitcairn Island (6 November) with a low A logged. Three birds were then seen the following day on Henderson Island with the only other record being another one there on 9 November.

**White Tern    *Gygis alba***

The most commonly recorded tern of the expedition with daily sightings. On most occasions A was logged although around Henderson Island (7-9 November) and Tenararo B was logged.

**Greater Crested Tern    *Thalasseus bergii***

This species was recorded on eight dates, although half these sightings were on Tahiti. All counts were in single figures with the highest number being on Tenararo Island where seven were seen (12 November).

**Sooty Tern    *Onychoprion fuscatus***

This extremely widespread and generally highly pelagic tern was seen on six days with a total of sixteen birds being recorded. The highest count was on 16 November during our daylight cruise from Morane towards Mangareva when six individuals were noted.

**Zebra Dove    *Geopelia striata***

The common introduced dove on Tahiti and seen in good numbers on all days. This species can be extremely tame and the pair that fed inside the restaurant at our hotel seemed utter fearless!!!

**Polynesian Ground Dove    *Gallicolumba erythroptera***

This species is now considered to be one of the rarest species of pigeon in the world and Birdlife International estimate that there are only 100-200 individuals, with the species occurring on just a handful of islands.



During our landing on Tenararo, the group split up and explored a reasonable percentage of the suitable habitat (12 November) on the island and located 21 individuals. This compares favourably with the data collected by a 2003 expedition which estimated that the population on the island was 50 birds (per Birdlife).

It is worth noting that the same expedition also located 50 birds on Morane, however, more recent visits have apparently only found a tiny number of individuals there and during our landing (14 November) none were seen.

### **Grey-green Fruit Dove    *Ptilinopus purpuratus***

There are suggestions that this species appears to be in serious decline on Tahiti and although a small number of individuals were seen at Papenoo (3 November) and Papahue (19 November) Valleys, it appeared to be uncommon given the areas we visited held large areas of seemingly suitable habitat.

### **Atoll Fruit Dove    *Ptilinopus coralensis***

This species proved to be reasonably numerous on Tenararo with A logged on both days we were ashore (12-13 November).

Atoll Fruit Doves have exclusively adapted to live on low coral atolls within the Tuamotu Archipelago and unlike many other species of fruit dove which can be difficult to find, these birds proved to be remarkably confiding as they fed on the coral beach on Tenararo.

### **Henderson Fruit Dove    *Ptilinopus insularis***

Two birds were seen during the landing on 7 November with the entire group enjoying some nice views of a perched individual after many hours of birding in some most unexpected and damp weather.

When we were able to land on East Beach a couple of days later, the species proved to be a little easier to find with two birds being seen during the couple of hours we were ashore.

### **Long-tailed Cuckoo    *Urodynamis taitensis***

Most of the population of this New Zealand endemic breeder migrate to Polynesia during the Austral winter with one individual being seen on Tenararo (13 November) and another the following day on Morane.

Like many cuckoos, this species is a brood parasite and its host species include Whitehead and Brown Creeper. As these three species have declined, so have the number of cuckoos.

### **Tahiti Swiftlet    *Aerodramus leucophaeus***

Unlike many species of swift, this species is extremely localised and was only seen on 19 November during our visit to Papahue Valley, where it was reasonably common. In contrast, none were recorded on our visit to Papenoo Valley (3 November) even though there were areas with seemingly similar habitat.

It is worth noting that under the criteria set out by Tobias et al, Birdlife International have recently lumped this species with the Marquesas Swiftlet and as a result, the newly defined species is treated as 'least concern', even though the number of birds on Tahiti is thought to be under 1,000 mature individuals (Birdlife). Other authorities, however, such as the *International Ornithologists' Union's World Bird List* still treat these two taxa as different species.

### **Stephen's Lorikeet    *Vini stepheni***

Undoubtedly one of the most range-restricted parrots in the world, this species is endemic to Henderson Island with four birds being seen during our landing on 7 November and a further two sighted a couple of days later.

Although Birdlife International suggest that 'this species appears to have adapted to the presence of the only introduced predator, Pacific Rat', the general lack of lorikeets seen during our two landings suggests that the Birdlife population estimate of 720-1,820 individuals may, unfortunately, be somewhat over optimistic.

### **Tahiti Kingfisher    *Todiramphus veneratus***

Some reasonable looks at a lone bird during our excursion to Papenoo Valley on the afternoon of 3 November, with some of the group also seeing this species at Papahue Valley (19 November).

### **Tahiti Monarch    *Pomarea nigra***

Although the numbers of this species have recovered somewhat in recent years, it is still one of the rarest birds on the planet with an estimated population of just over fifty individuals.

Our visit to the Papahue Valley (19 November) with one of the staff from the local Birdlife partner, MANU, was highly successful and we were taken to an occupied nest where we enjoyed some nice views of the birds, especially when the pair changed duty at the nest.

### **Red-vented Bulbul    *Pycnonotus cafer***

An extremely numerous introduction on Tahiti and seen in large numbers and particularly numerous in more urbanised habitats.

This species (along with Common Myna and Swamp Harrier) is impacting on the critically endangered Tahiti Monarch and as the group were leaving the Papahue Valley we saw an authorised hunter going into the reserve to shoot Bulbuls. This programme has presumably been started after 2,700 mynas and bulbuls were trapped in the period up until 2012 (per Birdlife International) even though there are still plenty of the latter in the valley.

### **Pacific Swallow    *Hirundo tahitica***

The Pacific Swallows on Tahiti are of one of the dark-belled forms and small numbers were seen at Papenoo (3 November) and Papahue (19 November). A number of the group commented that these looked quite different to the birds which they had seen on the West Pacific Odyssey where the birds look much closer to the Welcome Swallow of Australia and New Zealand.

### **Tahiti Reed Warbler    *Acrocephalus caffer***

This species was the first of the Tahiti endemics which we found, with eight individuals seen on the excursion to Papenoo Valley on 3 November. We saw both dark and pale morph individuals, although the former seemed to be more numerous.

It is worth noting that none were seen during our visit to Papahue Valley (19 November) and according to our local bird guide, the species does not occur there. Presumably the somewhat different forest is not to the liking of this endangered bird.

**Henderson Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus taiti*

The most conspicuous of the endemics on Henderson Island with at least seven individuals seen on our first day ashore (7 November) and another four birds a couple of days later.

**Pitcairn Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus vaughani*

The only land bird endemic on Pitcairn with good numbers (A logged) seen during our shore excursion on 6 November. There has presumably been a serious genetic bottleneck at some stage, as many of the birds we saw showed varying degrees of leucistic plumage.

**Silvereye** *Zosterops lateralis*

A common, but introduced, bird in suitable habitat on Tahiti and seen there on a daily basis.

**Common Myna** *Acridotheres tristis*

Along with the Red-vented Bulbul, this introduced species is undoubtedly one of the commonest birds on Tahiti, especially in more urbanised areas.

**Common Waxbill** *Estrilda astrild*

Another introduction on Tahiti and reasonably numerous around our hotel and in the more natural habitats we visited.

**Red-browed Finch** *Neochmia temporalis*

This species was less numerous than the Common Waxbill and seemingly more common in more natural habitats such as Papenoo Valley (3 Nov) where we found a couple of family parties.

**Chestnut-breasted Mannikin** *Lonchura castaneothorax*

Probably the most handsome of the introduced species on Tahiti and seen in good numbers around our hotel and also at Papahue Valley (19 November).

**Crimson-backed Tanager** *Ramphocelus dimidiatus*

Another introduced species on Tahiti with at least a couple of birds seen at Papahue Valley (19 November).

## MAMMALS

### **Pacific Rat** *Rattus exulans*

This species, which is also known as the Polynesian Rat, was reasonably common on Henderson Island despite the recent failed eradication project. Indeed, there is some evidence that the numbers currently on the island may even be higher than prior to the poisoning attempt.

Fortunately, no rats were seen whilst we were ashore on either Tenararo or Morane, although it is not difficult to imagine how catastrophic the impact could be on the wildlife (especially the Tuamotu Sandpipers) should this species ever reach there.

### **Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Mothers with calves were seen close inshore to Henderson Island (8 November) and at Portland Bank, near the Gambier Archipelago (11 November). The only other record was a breaching animal which was also seen close to the Portland Bank.

### **Blainville's Beaked Whale** *Mesoplodon densirostris*

A pod of 'beakies' showed extremely well off the stern of *Braveheart* whilst we were chumming off the Gambier Archipelago on 17 November. Although animals in this family can be extremely difficult to identify to species level, the excellent photos meant we could be confident that these were Blainville's Beaked Whales.

What made the encounter so extraordinary was that what was presumably the same family group made several passes of the vessel and we saw breaching and tail slapping, behaviours which are only rarely seen in beaked whales.

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