



WildWings

The Humboldt Current 2005

aboard M/V Polar Star

A personal account by John Brodie-Good

NB. This is an edited version of the full report, covering the Lima to Valparaiso section only.

The southern west coast of South America is heavily influenced by the Humboldt or Peruvian Current, a 'river' of cold water in the ocean that comes up from Antarctica. Combine this with the continental shelf edge close to land and the resultant upwellings, and rich feeding opportunities for both seabirds and cetaceans are provided. Eleven species of seabird are endemic to this region and we were to see these and much more, plus a total of seventeen definitely identified species of cetacean. Our voyage also included time ashore in both Peru and Chile allowing us to add a number of additional bird species to the pelagic list. The latter part of the voyage travels through the scenically stunning Chilean Fjords region and eventually finishing in Tierra del Fuego with a final landing on Cape Horn itself. This was a recce voyage for us but a great pleasure to travel with many of our most regular and keen sea-watching customers, more a group of friends. This first WildWings voyage has already shown this itinerary to be another essential one for the serious seabirder.

4th November - UK to Lima

Our non-stop flight from Madrid flew directly over the Amazon basin heading towards Lima, mid-afternoon and a gap in the clouds revealed the mighty river below, with numerous tributaries running into it. Just after 18.00 local time, the big Airbus touched down on the runway. Everyone's baggage arrived and then off to our hotel for the night. Most of the group felt shattered and we adjourned to the restaurant for dinner before retiring. I tried one of the national specialties, Ceviche; raw fish marinated in lime juice, a hint of chilli and thinly sliced onions washed down with a local cerveza or two, recommended.

5th November - Lima (a.m. Pantanos de Villa p.m. Callao)

The group assembled outside the hotel in readiness for our morning excursion to Pantanos de Villa, a marsh reserve just south of the city. An Amazilia Hummingbird obligingly fed for a few minutes on the big orange flowers growing the balcony of the building next door. A short drive brought us to the coast and the Pacific Ocean. Neotropical Cormorants, Peruvian Boobies and Pelicans were offshore with a number of Band-tailed Gulls on the beaches. A brief stop revealed two Peruvian Seaside Cinclodes before we arrived at the reserve entrance. Villa Marshes is a flat area with lagoons, water channels and more open dry areas, overlooked by a large shanty town. At the entrance, a Plumbeous Rail gave views in a small pool with Cinnamon Teal and White-cheeked Pintails. Our local guide joined us and we drove further in to look for Peruvian Thickneck, or as the guide called them (Thick-knee). We had only walked in about 100 yards or so and the call went up. We enjoyed good views of three of these superb cousins of our Stone Curlew. An added bonus was someone noticing a small nightjar type bird sitting on the sand, only

a few yards in front of us. Another one was flushed and flew off low. A quick check in the field guide revealed them to be Lesser Nighthawks.

Back into the bus, and a short drive to a small car park where little boats go into the 'reedy' channels. Many-coloured Rush-Tyrant was the main target and the boatmen showed the majority of the group a nest with two large youngsters being fed by their parents. A few of us chose to take a short walk on the other side of the road and looked out over a large lagoon with hundreds of bathing birds predominately Franklin's Gulls, this coast being their main wintering region. A few Grey-headed Gulls were also noted. Great Grebes, Andean and White-fronted Coots were present on the water, whilst Black Vultures soared overhead. Other birds included various egrets and herons, Puna Ibis, a Least Bittern clambering around in some of the waterside vegetation. Back to the hotel for lunch and checkout.

Early afternoon saw us heading for the port of Callao; our adventure was about to begin in earnest. Amongst the huge container and fuel ships sat our home for the next three weeks, the red-hulled expedition vessel *Polar Star*. Originally a Norwegian icebreaker, now converted for passenger use. After settling into our cabins we checked the harbour's waters and adjacent piers for birds. Our first Inca Terns could be seen flying and then resting on the harbour walls. They did not disappoint, although were not easy to photograph. Again, large numbers of Franklins Gull were present. The local security staff quickly banned the use of 'long lenses' in the docks and so some of us went across the road to the tourist market opposite the ship. The welcome and safety meeting were conducted by the Captain, Expedition Leader Hannah and her team with a glass of champagne and smoked salmon nibbles whilst we listened. Most people went back to their cabins to finish unpacking before dinner whilst I went back out on deck. With the assistance of a tug and local pilot, *Polar Star* slipped her moorings and started heading out to sea before turning south. A crescent moon with Jupiter next to it shone down from above. The ship started gently rolling, the familiar sense of excitement as a new oceanic adventure began.

6th November - Ballestas Islands and Paracas National Reserve (Peru)

As dawn broke, the sea birding began in earnest. Small groups of Peruvian Boobies, Peruvian Pelicans, a steady stream of Inca Terns (more 'noddy'-like than 'terns') and increasing numbers of Guanay Cormorants passed us by. Elliott's Storm Petrels flew low over the ocean, a handful of presumably Peruvian Diving Petrels flushed off the sea in front of the ship, and our first Sooty Shearwaters were seen. Our destination loomed out of the mist as the sun started to burn the murk off. Guanay Cormorants were now in streams, thousands of birds including in a feeding frenzy as we came in to anchor in the lee of one of these famous 'guano islands'. Signs of man's activity could be seen on many of the islets.

After breakfast into the Zodiacs for a two hour cruise. South American Sealions frequented many of the rocks with groups of animals in the water too. Cameras clicked as we enjoyed excellent close views of the teeming population of these uninhabited islands, although the mainland could be seen clearly in the distance. Our first penguins too, Humboldts, in the sea, on a beach and much higher up on one island. A major seabird spectacular complete with all the associated smells. A few speedboats appeared with general tourists from the mainland.

Late morning and we hauled anchor and headed in to Paracas and it's National Park. A lone Bottlenose Dolphin was seen close to the shore. An almost two mile Zodiac ride found us ashore after lunch in this small fishing and tourist community. The ship's ground agents were ready by the jetty and we soon off into the park proper. This coastline is probably the driest in the world, the edge of the Atacama desert (annual rainfall just over a millimetre - in effect, dew!) One of the most barren landscapes any of us had ever seen, not a plant in sight. We drove the short distance to the park's museum and walked out to the watchtower overlooking an inlet with mud flats. The heat haze was so severe that of the several thousand birds in front of us, very few could be ID'ed. Seven Chilean Flamingos (two adults, five first years) were visible. Otherwise large numbers of Franklin's Gulls and many waders sp. could be seen, which was frustrating.

We then continued south of the peninsula and stopped at a cliff top lookout and several deserted bays on the way back. Turkey Vultures soared over the dry land and sea. More Inca Terns,

cormorants and boobies, whilst Blackish and American Oystercatchers were also added to the growing trip list. One of the beaches finally yielded some shorebirds we could get to grips with. Turnstones, a flock of Hudsonian Whimbrels plus a few singletons. A flock of ten or so Surfbirds added themselves to a number of the group's life lists. A small flock of Least Sandpipers contained at least one Semi-Palmated plus a lovely pair of Snowy Plovers. A lone Osprey was seen on several occasions. A group of about 10 large terns were agreed as Royals. As we drove back to our landing point the desert turned many subtle shades as the sun was lowering in the sky.

7th November - Early a.m. At sea, Nasca (southern Peru)

We had two hours at sea this morning before arriving in Puerto San Juan. Our first Giant and White-chinned Petrels joined a few more Peruvian Diving Petrels, three Humboldt Penguins and the supporting cast of Peruvian Pelicans, Boobies and various cormorants. Five or so Humpback Whales were also seen, their under-flukes varying from almost black to almost white. The Zodiacs ferried us quickly to shore, to the slightly squalid settlement of Puerto San Juan where our next 'birders bus' awaited us. We drove inland, into this barren, dry landscape, heading for Nasca and it's airport. We were soon boarding our collection of light aircraft for our 30-minute or so over flight of the world-famous Nasca Lines. The little aircraft banked this way and that so both sides could see the unique markings on the desert below us. Many of us were surprised how small the famous shapes were but overawed by the overall markings, in particular large thin triangles everywhere.

Everyone landed with their breakfast still inside and walked across the road to explore a hotel's gardens. Lurid Vermillion Flycatchers were busy nesting and feeding. Several handsome Andean Swifts zoomed overhead. Various finches and Long-tailed Mockingbirds were around plus more Amazilia hummers. A short drive took us to the town's museum, photos subsequently identifying a female Peruvian Sheartail in the garden. We then headed further east into the interior which was just as barren as the coast. The bus pulled over on a bend and using GPS information we walked up into a dried out riverbed amongst a small group of cactus. Fairly quickly a Cactus Canestero was found, our target bird, the whole group getting views. On the way back down to the ship we took a dusty side road and almost immediately came across two Peruvian Thick-knees right by the road. After a brief stop for some pixil-fixing, we continued on. The unmistakable shape of a small owl on the other side of the road brought the bus to a halt again. A delightful pair of Burrowing Owls, looking slightly comical with their long legs, their heads switching from straight ahead to ninety degrees left or right with an instant movement. Time to return to the village and return to the ship.

On the beach whilst we waited the few minutes for the Zodiacs, a Willet, Spotted Sandpiper and a single Grey Plover with the Turnstone and gulls. As we gathered on the back deck for a beer a flock of 35 Black Skimmers suddenly came past and disappeared into the new night.

NB Waved Albatross was not seen at sea during these first two days. This species had been seen in both 2003 and 2004. The Current was two degrees colder than normal this year. 16 were seen the day before the ship arrived in Lima so we didn't miss them by much!

8th November - At sea

Our first full day at sea finally yielded some albatross. About 50 Salvin's, five or so Buller's and a few Black-broweds (all immatures). Just a taste of what was to come. Our first Cape Petrel too, showing 'neat' blocks of white on the upperwing, possibly from the Snares Islands off New Zealand? White-chinned Petrels were in double figures, previous observers' claims of Westland being identifiable by the fact the birds were in moult, proved erroneous from photographs taken of some of today's birds. You have to see the bill properly to separate these two species. Similar concerns soon mounted re pterodroma ID when we also had our first birds, approx 15 during the day. As some of the birds twisted and banked some observers claimed dark caps (i.e. leaning towards Stejneger's) but photos taken clearly showed this being a trick of the light, today's birds were all De Filippes' (or Masatierra) Petrels. How you separate White-capped and Salvin's Albatross in the field was another little mystery to us. Digital photography is hugely helping make 'difficult' seabird ID a much more accurate process. Our first Pink-footed Shearwaters too, about 10, lazily gliding over the sea.

But today was Storm-Petrel day. We estimated 700 or so Elliott's Storm Petrels, about 30 Wedge-rumped but the two star specialties showed in much large numbers. The dark Markham's, we estimated over 1000 but the biggest prize of all, Hornby's (Ringed) Storm-Petrel we estimated over 6000 birds! The nesting site of this unique and beautiful little petrel is still unknown; I wonder what percentage of the world's population we had seen today? Peruvian Pelicans and boobies were also still present in good numbers and late afternoon we came across patches of 'boiling sea' as hundreds of thousands of anchovies grouped together for safety.

In the morning a Peregrine appeared way out in the ocean, presumably hunting Storm-Petrels to be devoured on the wing. (Similar behaviour noted in the North Pacific some years ago) Hundreds of Red-necked Phalaropes were also seen with a few Grey's thrown in, winter visitors from their Arctic breeding grounds. Our first Chilean Skuas plus a handful of Long-taileds, a few Arctics and a Pomarine. Five or so Sabine's Gulls plus the handsome Grey Gulls were seen throughout the day. The Grey Gulls seemed to associate with feeding Pelicans and dolphins. A number of Inca Terns were seen whilst we also noted Black, Elegant, Arctic, possible South American and a probable Peruvian Tern (Little/Least type) as well as a number of terns sp. A single Barn Swallow at sea was a surprise. South American Fur Seals could be seen laying on their backs with all their flippers and tail in the air.

Late morning the sea was full of feeding Dusky Dolphins, we estimated 500 in all, and late afternoon the cry of 'whales!'. Another interesting ID scenario. There seemed to be a large single animal and then a cow calf pair. The pair showed all the signs of Sei Whale from the lower deck. Diffuse, bushy blow, blowhole and fin often on the surface together, fin usually the last part of the animals left as it cruised along in the water. The observers on the top deck said they could see white jaw lines and chevrons; They were in fact Fin Whales. Yet again the definitive features of each species need to be seen properly before definite ID can be confirmed. Our group had already split into two to some degree. Some watched from the bridge and bridge wings (light-heartedly known as the 'bridge kids'), effectively three decks up from the 'bow boys'. The higher position was much better for spotting cetaceans and viewing whales whilst lower down seemed better for the smaller seabirds and seeing dolphin fin shapes correctly, the angles being quite different on occasions. A single Minke was seen briefly too and a number of flying fish. Our group radios meant everyone enjoyed the maximum benefits of both positions. Quite a day, seabirds from the Arctic, New Zealand and of course the region we were in.

9th November 9 - At sea (a.m. Arica (northern Chile) p.m.)

Dawn saw us a few miles from the northern Chilean city of Arica, also gateway to the sea for Bolivia, which is connected by a railway and now a road. As day started the mournful calls of Grey Gulls flying out to sea overhead could be heard. As we headed in a few Peruvian Diving Petrels flew up from the water and away. As we tied up the ship we were surrounded by Inca Terns, some which landed on the ship, others settled themselves on our ropes and adjacent quayside. A very large number of photos were taken! Some carrying fish which seemed to be being offered to potential partners as love-tokens. Several made seemly brief attempts with their gifts and then instead, happily swallowed them themselves. Soon we boarded our birders bus and headed out south of the city into the barren desert.

We arrived at the Chaca Valley, an area of a few houses and some scrubby vegetation including acacia trees. A few White-crested Elaenias perched conspicuously with the ever present Vermillion Flycatchers. Our main quarry was Tamarugo Conebill, a species only discovered thirty or so years ago. The whole group got good views of a number of them shortly after arriving. Plain-mantled Tit-spinetails were also seen and a Scale-throated Earthcreeper was 'bouncing' around the area, not all seeing it. A few Oasis Hummingbirds were seen well, including a youngster being vigorously feed by it's parents. A short drive back down the Pan-American Highway brought us to a few more houses, gardens and small fields. Our target here was the critically endangered Chilean Woodstar, a tiny hummingbird. Chris spotted a small hummer on the telegraph wires and we exploded out of the bus to enjoy a male sitting above us. This species is under threat mainly from Oasis Hummingbirds whose range they are encroaching, and compete for the same feeding flowers. We dashed back to town; time being short for a final

look for the other hummingbird in the museum's gardens. With just a minute or so to go before we had to leave, a superb male Peruvian Shearwater finally appeared.

As we left harbour mid-afternoon a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins came in to bow ride, a good omen. A quietish afternoon, still plenty of Markhams and five Hornby's Storm Petrels were seen today by just a few observers. The first Westland Petrel was finally nailed from the White-chinneds, a digital photo proving the point. The undoubted highlight of the afternoon was an encounter with at least two Blue Whales and the captain turned off course in a slow circle so we could get better views. The animals seemed to be of the race Pygmy Blue Whale but they were still pretty large. They seemed a smooth blue/grey, not showing the mottled patterning the nominate larger race does. The tailstocks seemed much slimmer too. This was the third year running the ship had come across this species in this same area. A late distant Fin Whale cruising parallel to us ending the day's sightings.

10th November - At sea (Atacama Coast, Chile)

No new seabirds today, but a chance to familiarise ourselves with species already seen. Buller's Albatross struggled to fly in the calm conditions but simply would not come close to the ship. At least 70 noted with two definite Salvin's and about 60 sps. Of three giant petrels one was definitely ID'ed as a Southern. Pink-footed Shearwaters seemed to be increasing in numbers too whilst Elliott's and a few Wedge-rumped Stormies were seen, where all the Wilson's recorded previously on this voyage were, we did not know. 10 plus pterodromas passed us by, at least 5 being definite De Filippes. We counted over 300 Markham's Storm Petrels too. Peruvian Boobies and pelicans occasionally passed us by, numbers well down on previous days. Phalaropes too seemed to be in much lower numbers today

Cetaceans included a male Cuvier's Beaked Whale spotted by Mike, a nice group of 40 or so Pilot Whales sp as well during the morning. Late afternoon and the distinctive forward blows of Sperm Whales could be seen in the distance. The captain again kindly slowed down for an encounter. They seemed quite scattered over the sea however, a group of 10-15 being the largest. At least one sounded nicely revealing its tail flukes as it disappeared into the depths below us.

11th November - At sea (Atacama Coast, Chile)

Another steady stream of Buller's Albatross today (many showing signs of moult), over 100 seen plus just over half a dozen immature year Black-browed's. A few more Giant Petrels too, all initial signs that as we travelled down the coast, more 'cold water' species from the south were starting to appear. A few more Hornby's Storm Petrels were noted and what was to be our last Markham's, around 50 or so. Over 650 'oceanites' type Storm-Petrels but unlike previous reports, they all seemed Elliott's still, our first definite Wilson's still to be seen. The group were still generally split with some on the bows (the largely gentle conditions so far allowed this luxury), giving the keen photographers ample opportunity to get good shots of most of the species including the smallest Storm-Petrels. 'Machine-gun' Martin eventually went home with over 30GB of images! The gang who leaned towards cetaceans more were up on the bridge deck, on the open area below the bridge itself or the wings although some of us found the vibration up there a little too much on this particular vessel. The first Antarctic (or Southern) Fulmar was seen today and the second Westland Petrel (again from photos). A number of the White-chinned Petrels were showing worn plumage. A small pod of Dusky Dolphins were seen during breakfast.

Later in the morning the call on the radio that many of us had dreamed of suddenly came – "rightwhale dolphins!" Five or six of the almost mythical Southern Rightwhale Dolphins had been spotted close to the ship on the port side. The encounter was frustratingly brief, some of us on the front deck only seeing the disturbance in the water, small fish leaping out of the way and smooth black backs as they moved away. Others on the bridge wing enjoyed full, albeit brief views. A group of about 50 Common Dolphins were seen in a feeding frenzy of Peruvian Boobies later on. The bridge deck spotters also saw a number of unidentified cetaceans, in spite of much discussion and speculation. An interesting looking small whale sp on one side, several beaked whales, and a group of Southern Bottlenose Whales. Our cetacean list was rising all the time but one always has to accept that many will get away. The birder's tendency to name

everything they see simply does not apply to many cetacean sightings which can often be very brief. Distance and ever-changing light are also huge factors too.

The second big surprise of the day came late afternoon when the scream through the radios came - "Swallow-tailed Gull!" Chris had spotted them on the sea and they took off and flew back behind the ship, dropping away rapidly. We had long thought that we were now too far south for this unique nocturnal feeding gull, but had brief views. I now thought it was time to start hacking up the mackerel we had been given and started throwing pieces off the stern. Paul Harvey kindly took over and soon we had the Swallow-tailed Gulls coming back on us again, giving much better views and photo opportunities, along with some Pink-footed Shearwaters and Kelp Gulls who joined in the free feed. The gulls were an adult and first winter plumage none of us who had been to the Galapagos had seen before. What another wonderful day!

12th November - Valparaiso (central Chile)

We woke up still at sea, but only a few miles from today's destination - Chile's, and historically one of the South American west coast's, major ports. A few diving petrels were noted including a bird which flew close to the bows with dusky head sides, suggesting Common but which the books showed would be well north of its known range. A White-crested Elaenia flew around and landed on various parts of the ship, not seeming to notice the coastline nearby. Two butterflies were sleeping on one of the lights on the back of deck 3. Most of the Chilean navy seemed to be in port and there were multi-coloured houses as far as the eye could see on the hills above.

We loaded up in our next birder's bus and headed north along the coastline, through the resorts including VINO del Mar to our main site, the estuary of the Aconogua river, seeing our first Austral Thrushes by the side of the road. We stopped on the way at one of the many little rocky outcrops for excellent views of a pair of Chilean Seaside Cinclodes which seemed to be nesting in a pipe sticking out of the wall below us. The rocks held Peruvian Pelicans, boobies, a few Inca Terns and a single Red-legged Cormorant. The estuary held a resting flock of about 50 Black Skimmers along with Franklin's and Kelp Gulls plus South American Terns. Waders included a handful of White-backed Stilts, a few noisy pairs of Southern Lapwings, the odd Hudsonian Whimbrel and two Lesser Yellowlegs. Our first Caracaras were all Chimangos, the South American equivalent of 'crows'. We drove around to the north side and entered a farm bordering the reedy part of the estuary. The star birds were a few male Spectacled Tyrants, an all black flycatcher with white around the eye, a whitish bill and white ends to the wings in flight. A handsome pair of Austral Negritos were feeding in the middle of a football pitch and one and a half (one bird was tailless) endemic Chilean Mockingbirds were noted, along with our first Long-tailed Meadowlarks.

We headed back towards the harbour but stopped for the chance of eating 'off ship' in a very pleasant seafood restaurant overlooking some rocks stacked with Brown Pelicans and Kelp Gulls. Most of us enjoyed some fresh fish with fresh salsa and rice or chips, washed down with some very nice Sauvignon Blanc or local beers.

A final stop by a beach for photos of some Grey Gulls and soon we were back on board and sailing south again.

www.wildwings.co.uk