

Status and Occurrence of Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland.

Introduction and Distribution

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) is a widespread polymorphic species found in the warm tropical waters of the Pacific and Indian Ocean (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Onley and Scofield 2007). This species breeds on numerous islands (Onley and Scofield 2007). The timing of breeding varies considerably due to the wide range of breeding sites (Onley and Scofield 2007). The southernmost population is found on Kermadec Island and breeds from October to May (Onley and Scofield 2007). There is also a breeding population on the Hawaiian Islands which has different timing and breeds from April to November (Onley and Scofield 2007). A close breeding colony to North America is found on San Benedicto of the Isla Revillagigedo off Mexico (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Howell and Webb 2010). This is a regular species in the waters off the Pacific Coast of mainland Mexico south to the Gulf of Mexico (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Howell and Webb 2010). Along the west coast of North America, the Wedge-tailed Shearwater is an accidental species with surprisingly few records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). This is likely due to this species' affinity for warm water (Onley and Scofield 2007). In California, there are 7 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In Oregon, there are only 2 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are 2 records for the state, both were found dead, and both come from Ocean City, Grays Harbor County (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, this species is accidental and has only a couple of sight records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are no records for Alaska (West 2008, Gibson *et al.* 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Wedge-tailed Shearwater is covered in most standard North American Field Guides. This species is polymorphic having both light and dark phases found widespread throughout the general population (Brazil 2009). The Wedge-tailed Shearwater is a small, mid-sized shearwater measuring 46 cm in length with a wingspan of 101 cm (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The more common Pink-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus creatopus*) is larger measuring 48 cm with a wingspan of 109 cm (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The smaller and more common Buller's Shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*) by comparison measures 41 cm with a wingspan of 102 cm (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater is a mid-sized species that has both a dark morph and a light morph (Onley and Scofield 2007). Both have long wedge-shaped tails (Onley and Scofield 2007). Flight style is very characteristic of the species (Onley and Scofield 2007). The Wedge-tailed Shearwater flies with rather lazy, almost leisurely with short glides on bowed wings held

forwards, interspersed with slow flaps, and looks less graceful than other shearwater species (Onley and Scofield 2007, Brazil 2009).

Dark morph birds are completely dark brown all over (Brazil 2009). Freshly moulted birds and juveniles may appear almost black (Brazil 2009). All ages have faintly reflective surfaces to the underside of flight feathers that, from a distance in strong light, may look like pale underwing feathers similar to a Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) (Brazil 2009). The bill is small and thin and dark (Brazil 2009). The tail is long and pointed and, when fanned, looks wedged-shaped (Onley and Scofield 2007).

Light morph birds have a small, thin, dark gray bill with dark eyes (Brazil 2009). The crown is dark with a light brown neck, back and rump edges with white (Onley and Scofield 2007). The upperwing has light brown with white feathers on the shoulders with dark primaries and a dark secondary edge (Brazil 2009). The tail is dark, long and pointed in shape when folded (Onley and Scofield 2009). The throat and belly are white (Onley and Scofield 2007). The undertail coverts are white with dark bars (Brazil 2009). The dark on the sides of the neck does not extend onto the breast on clean light morph birds (Onley and Scofield 2007). The axillaries are white with a broad dark trailing edge and dark primaries (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a thin dark line of the leading edge of the axillaries and a dark line on the leading edge of the wing (Onley and Scofield 2007). Some birds are variable with more dark markings on the sides of the neck down onto the breast and sides of the belly, and are darker in the ventral area (Onley and Scofield 2007). These variable birds also have more dark smudging on the axillaries (Brazil 2009).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 3 good sight records. The first was found by Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne onboard a BC Ferry as the bird flew by at close range on June 18, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The second was made by Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland while conducting a sea watch from Otter Point near Sooke on August 12, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The following details are taken directly from Rick Toochin's field notes: "Today was remarkable as we have seen thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, one identifiable Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*), 2 Manx Shearwaters (*Puffinus puffinus*), hundreds of Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), at least 30 Pink-footed Shearwaters and 5 Buller's Shearwaters close to shore following the large Seiner ships catching huge volumes of fish. Also present were 38 Black-footed Albatrosses (*Phoebastria nigripes*), 2 Laysan Albatrosses (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) and a sub-adult Short-tailed Albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*) (that was also seen well on a whale watching boat!). "These 2 birds first off have a completely different colour to normal Sooty Shearwaters. They

were a light soft sandy brown on the upper wings, back and tail. The belly and underside of the bird as well as the wings were also a light sandy brown. The upper wing had light brownish edges to the overall colour. The underside had a light panel in the upper part of the under wing that was small in shape and light in colour. The entire shape of the birds was slender and elongated in shape. The tail was extremely long in length and neither bird spread its tail, but it was obviously longer in shape than Sooty Shearwaters and pointed at the folded tip. The wings are bent forward and the bird seldom flaps its wings, but then it flaps straight down, not fluttery like other shearwaters. The wings are narrow in shape and very pointed. The head is small and rounded in shape with the bill looking thin but long. What really stands out with these 2 birds is the manner in which they flew. The birds would go up and hang in the air at the top of the arc and fly off on slight sorties, and literally hang in the air for seconds before continuing down on the arc to the water. I have only ever seen Frigatebird fly like this before, never a shearwater. In size the Sooty Shearwaters were similar, but this bird looked finer and more delicate in its build". Unfortunately photographs were not obtained as they are very difficult to get while conducting sea watches. Interestingly enough, the third sighting for the province was made by a visiting birder, John Yerger, from the deck of the MV Coho Ferry crossing on BC side of Juan de Fuca on August 25, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This observer notes almost all of the same species of shearwaters (J. Yerger Pers. Comm.). The huge numbers of shearwaters previously mentioned; and he described in detail this species as it flew past the ferry (J. Yerger Pers. Comm.). This observer had seen this species previously in Hawaii (J. Yerger Pers. Comm.). All these birds likely came up the coast in 2009 due to the warm water that was off the west coast at the time. This species should be watched for in El Nino years in the waters off British Columbia when ocean surface temperatures are higher than in normal years. Though the Wedge-tailed Shearwater is very rare north of Mexico, it should be watched for on pelagic trips in the future. As with any seabird, future occurrence in the pelagic waters off British Columbia is always possible.

Table 1: Records of Wedge-tailed Shearwater for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult June 18, 2009: Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne: Hecate Strait, Queen Charlotte Islands
(P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 2.(2) adults August 12, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: off Otter Point, Sooke (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult August 25, 2009: John Yerger: MV Coho Ferry crossing on BC side of Juan de Fuca
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Don Cecile for editing the original manuscript. We also wish to thank Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne for extensive details on their observation of a Wedge-tailed Shearwater in Hecate Strait.

References

- Brazil, M. 2009. Birds of East Asia: China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Russia. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 528pp.
- Dunn, J. L. and J. Alderfer. 2011. National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. National Geographic Society, Washington D.C. 574pp.
- Gibson, D.D, L. H. DeCicco, R. E. Gill Jr., S. C. Heinl, A. J. Lang, T. G. Tobish Jr., and J. J. Withrow. 2013. Third Report of the Alaska Checklist Committee, 2002-2012. Western Birds 44: 183-195.
- Hamilton, R. A., M. A. Patten, and R. A. Erickson. 2007. Rare Birds of California: A work of the California rare bird record committee. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, California. 605pp.
- Howell, S. N. G. and S. Webb. 2010 (eds). A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. Oxford University Press Inc., New York. 851pp.
- OFO. 2012. Oregon Field Ornithologists - Records Committee. [Online resource] <http://www.oregonbirds.org/index.html>. [Accessed: December 14, 2015].
- Onley, D. and P. Scofield. 2007. Albatrosses, Petrels & Shearwaters of the World. Princeton Field Guides. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 240pp.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. The Sibley field guide to birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 545pp.
- Tietz, J. and G. McCaskie. 2014. Update to Rare Birds of California: 1 January 2004 – 4 February 2014. [Online Resource] Retrieved from http://www.californiabirds.org/cbrc_book/update.pdf [Accessed: January 8, 2016].
- Toochin, R., J. Fenneman and P. Levesque. 2014. British Columbia Rare Bird List: Casual and Accidental Records: January 1, 2014: 3rd Edition. [Online resource] Retrieved from <http://ibis.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BCRareBirdListVersionXZABC.pdf> [Accessed: December 9, 2015].
- Wahl, T. R., B. Tweit, and S. Mlodinow. 2005. Birds of Washington: Status and Distribution. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. 436pp.

WBRC. 2014. Washington Bird Records Committee – Summary of Decisions. Washington Ornithological Society, Seattle, WA. [Online resource]
<http://www.wos.org/wbrcaccepteddec2014.pdf> [Accessed: December 16, 2015].

West, G. C. 2008. A Birder's Guide to Alaska. American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, CO. 586 pp.