



**WildWings**

## **Western Pacific Odyssey 2012 Trip Report**

By Chris Collins, Tour Leader

### **Introduction**

This was the sixth Western Pacific Odyssey (“WPO”) and it was, without question, the most successful to date with many very special species seen.

During the trip, we saw an excellent selection of poorly known seabirds including New Zealand Storm-petrel, Magnificent Petrel, Polynesian Storm-petrel, Heinroth’s Shearwater, Beck’s Petrel, Christmas Shearwater, Short-tailed Albatross and Japanese Murrelet, as well as the best views so far of the mystery storm-petrel off New Caledonia which was first seen on the 2008 expedition.

The speciality land birds were surely headed by the extraordinary Kagu, although to some extent this species was somewhat eclipsed by some great looks at Crow Honeyeater, with at least eleven individuals seen at Riviere Bleue.

A 35 mile zodiac ride and tough climb on Tol South also rewarded some of the WildWings group with the critically endangered Faichuuk White-eye, as well as Chuuk Monarch, both of which are only found on a few small islands in the Chuuk Lagoon. Other desirable endemics on the expedition included Roviana Rail, Buff-headed Coucal, White-headed Fruit-dove, Rennell Shrikebill and New Caledonian Crow.

Although the seas were somewhat choppier than on some previous occasions, nevertheless, some great cetaceans were still encountered with at least thirteen species observed. These included Ginkgo-toothed Beaked Whale, Pygmy Killer Whale, Melon-headed Whale and Dwarf Sperm Whale – all of which are only rarely seen.

These notes describe some of the trip highlights of the voyage, however, for a detailed species list please see our systematic list.

**At sea: Tauranga – Norfolk Island**

**29<sup>th</sup> March-1<sup>st</sup> April 2012**

Having boarded the ‘*Spirit of Enderby*’ in the late afternoon, we departed Tauranga in the early evening and cruised overnight to the Hauraki Gulf, where shortly after dawn (30<sup>th</sup> March) we were off the Mokohinau Islands. These small islands regularly hold a small population of Grey Ternlets, a species which is only rarely seen from the New Zealand coastline, and as we circled their favoured islet, at least a dozen birds could be seen roosting on the rocks or flying nearby.

With everyone having seen this tropical seabird, we cruised on to look for our first major target of the voyage, the New Zealand Storm-petrel (“NZSP”) – a species which had only been rediscovered in 2003.

Reaching the 200 metre contour line, a fish oil slick was laid (the first of many which would go overboard during the next month!!) and before long, several NZSPs were feeding on this. The Captain turned the ship and we made a series of close passes, giving everyone some good views of the birds. Whilst it was difficult to be sure of the number of individuals involved, at least fourteen were present, giving us the highest simultaneous count of any WPO.

With our main Hauraki Gulf target seen, attention could turn to other birds and during the day, an excellent supporting cast was found including at least five albatross ‘species’ (Antipodean, Gibson’s, Campbell, Shy and Pacific) and our first Grey-faced and Black Petrels. With two Pycroft’s Petrels also photographed, it had been a great start to our voyage.

As the ship headed on towards Norfolk Island, we continued to add new seabirds over the next days, with our first sightings of several tropical species including Tahiti, White-necked, Gould’s and Kermadec Petrels, plus a new bird for the WPO (close to the Three Kings Islands), a Herald Petrel. There was, however, confirmation that we were still not too far from cooler climes with a number of albatrosses also seen.

By the early evening of 1<sup>st</sup> April, we could see Norfolk Island and two Little Shearwaters were recorded as we got closer to the island. Although the birds which breed here are all currently treated as being of the race *assimilis*, there are winter and summer breeding populations which differ so markedly in size that they need different sized leg rings. It seems highly likely that this is a similar scenario to the ‘Maderian Storm-petrels’ on the Azores and surely a likely split when someone does a proper study of these birds.....

### **Norfolk Island – New Caledonia                      2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

During our journey from New Zealand, there had been an almost constant swell and we awoke on the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> April to the wind still blowing from the east, the worst possible direction for getting ashore on Norfolk Island as both landing sites are eastward facing. Radio messages from the shore soon confirmed that landing at either quay would be impossible, so a scout zodiac was launched to see if it might be possible to use the one sandy beach on the western side of the island. Even from the ship, however, we could see large breakers crashing ashore and it was soon confirmed that we would be unable to land.

Undaunted, Expedition Leader Aaron announced there would be a zodiac cruise along the rocky shoreline. Whilst it seemed unlikely that we would find any of the endemics, by playing recordings of Norfolk Gerygone at a somewhat deafening volume, two birds were eventually coaxed into view.

With several Wandering Tattlers and the first frigatebird of the expedition, a Greater, also spotted along with two vagrant Little Black Cormorants, the excursion proved highly successful somewhat reducing our disappointment at being unable to get ashore.

By late morning, everyone was back on the ship and as we cruised northwards, several more Little Shearwaters were seen, as well as the last Grey-faced Petrels of the trip.

With the cancelled landing giving us a few extra hours, the decision was taken to investigate some seamounts off south-east New Caledonia and the following morning, we arrived at the more southerly of these. The subsequent couple of hours will be long remembered by everyone who was onboard, as our oil slick attracted in a superb selection of birds including the WPO's own mystery species, the 'New Caledonian Storm-petrel'. Whilst this had been seen three times before, all previous sightings had been a lot closer to Noumea, so it was a genuine surprise to find it here too.

The Captain skilfully navigated the ship around the slick and we had some great views of the bird with these being unquestionably the best looks since the first sightings in 2008.

With a Wilson's Storm-petrel obligingly flying close to it at times, it was possible to make some direct size comparisons (the streaky storm-petrel was definitely larger) and the underwing pattern was certainly different to the NZSPs we had seen only a few days before in the Hauraki Gulf. It seemed we really were looking at an undescribed taxon.....

With almost everyone concentrating on the storm-petrel, less attention was paid to some of the other birds which were also feeding on the slick but one which came in for a short time and certainly warranted more than a casual glance was an exceptionally dark Collared-type Petrel. Photos confirmed that this was indeed a Magnificent Petrel, a taxon which Hadoram Shirihai had only described a couple of years ago from Vanuatu. Although currently considered to be a subspecies of Collared Petrel, this bird may soon be elevated to species status and it was another fantastic addition to our already burgeoning list of seabirds.

With White-bellied Storm-petrel also showing well, the morning had been a spectacular success and the disappointment of not getting ashore on Norfolk Island was now a distant memory.

## **New Caledonia**

**5<sup>th</sup> April 2011**

The trip to Riviere Bleue always requires an extremely early wakeup call but with everyone ready on time, we were on our way to the National Park at 04:30am.

Jean Marc Meriot (the Park's Head Ranger) had kindly agreed to allow us into the Park an hour before the general public and before 06:00am we were heading for Pont Perignon (the closest our buses could get to the forest), with Jean Marc and Yves Letocart (now retired but widely considered to have saved the Kagu from extinction) leading the way in a Park 4x4.

Walking across the bridge, two shuttle buses took us to the edge of the forest and once everyone had assembled, we set off along the forest road to begin our search for our principle target, the Kagu. Jean Marc had gone ahead and was playing a recording (at an almost ear-damaging volume !!) but with no response, he suggested we try a different territory a couple of hundred metres further along the road.

The birds were more obliging here and we enjoyed fantastic views of a family party which seemed utterly oblivious to the presence of fifty or so people. With birds soon appearing on both sides of the road, we were able to spread out a little and with these coming within a matter of metres of us, even those with the smallest of camera lenses were able to get some great photos – a truly unforgettable experience.

With our main target bird found, we continued along the road and a radio message soon came through from those at the front that a Crow Honeyeater had been spotted. This species is generally the toughest of the endemics to find at Riviere Bleue and most of the group hurried along to see it, however, we soon realised that there had been no need for haste, as there were multiple sightings over the next couple of hours. We were extremely fortunate that there were several trees flowering immediately adjacent to the track and over the course of the morning at least eleven Crow Honeyeaters were seen – without question, the best showing by this species on any WPO visit.

With the weather continuing to remain dry, most of the group found the vast majority of the commoner endemics including New Caledonian Cuckoo-shrike, New Caledonian Imperial-pigeon, Horned Parakeet, Yellow-bellied Robin and Streaked Fantail and some also saw New Caledonian Crow, a species which can easily be missed at the Park.

After a traditional French baguette lunch at one of the Park's shelters and another hour for birding in the forest, the rain began to fall and we boarded the buses for the journey back to the entrance where we searched for Red-faced Parrotfinch and Barred Honeyeater. Whilst most found the latter, unfortunately the parrotfinches were uncharacteristically difficult.

With some reluctance, we said goodbye to Jean Marc and Yves and headed back to Noumea where the '*Spirit of Enderby*' awaited us. Shortly after 4pm, we had left the wharf and were at sea heading for our next destination, Rennell Island in the Solomons.

#### **At sea: New Caledonia – Rennell Island, Solomon Islands**

**6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

Being over 200 nautical miles long, New Caledonia is a pretty substantial island and we spent most of 6<sup>th</sup> April with this visible distantly on our starboard side and during the day encountered our first Brown Booby - a sure sign that we were indeed leaving the cooler waters of the south and reaching more tropics seas.

The 'big bird' on this leg is the Polynesian Storm-petrel, a species which is certainly not found on every WPO. Our luck was destined to continue with two individuals seen on 7<sup>th</sup> April not far from some small atolls which are off the northern end of New Caledonia. The big surprise, however, was when a third bird made a close pass the following day. By now, we were in territorial waters of the Solomon Islands and this was the most northerly record of this species on any WPO by at least 200 nautical miles !!!

With the first big groups of Sooty Terns on the voyage, along with Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Wilson's Storm-petrels and Tahiti Petrels, there was a good potpourri of species to be found as we headed for our four days of back-to-back landings in the Solomon Islands.

#### **Rennell, Solomon Islands**

**9<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

It had been an eventful night for some of the Expedition Team when word reached the ship that the officials (from Customs, Immigration, Quarantine and Agriculture) had been unable to fly to Rennell and the agent had instead put them on a flight to the nearby island of Bellona. With little to go on except a blurry Google Earth satellite image and assurances that there would be a bonfire on the beach at 2am, Aaron and Adam had gamely headed ashore in the dark. Much to everyone's relief,

the plan worked perfectly and by the time the morning wake-up call came, the ship was cleared and we were close to our intended destination.

As the sun rose over Lavangu Bay, however, we had a nasty shock as another ship was present and there was a horrible fresh scar on the hillside. Tragically, a logging concession had been granted and with large piles of logs visible, we headed ashore apprehensive as to what we would find.

On the beach, we were met by some of the local inhabitants who told us that they were firmly against the logging but had no say in the matter and as we walked inland it was apparent that this was going to have a huge impact on this tranquil island.

Despite the changes, we were soon exploring and the five species which are endemic to Rennell were the main priority and it did not take long before we started to find these with Rennell Shrikebill, Rennell Fantail, Rennell White-eye, Bare-eyed White-eye and Rennell Starling all found in quick succession.

Despite the fact that it very quickly gets mighty hot on Rennell, bird activity did not significantly diminish as the temperature climbed and over the next few hours, other species included Silver-capped Fruit-dove (which is endemic to Rennell and just a few other small islands), both Pacific and Island Imperial-pigeons, Cardinal Myzomela, Island Thrush (which on Rennell resembles and sounds like a mini-Blackbird) and the Rennell Fan-tailed Gerygone which is surely a good split from the birds we had seen a few days before on New Caledonia.

Several species of parrot were also found including the miniscule Finsch's Pygmy-parrot, the rather raucous and surely inappropriately named Singing Parrot and the brilliantly coloured Yellow-bibbed Lory.

By late morning, most people had enjoyed good looks at all the likely species and after a swim over Rennell's corals, it was time to rejoin the ship and we set sail for Makira.

### **Makira, Solomon Islands**

**10<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

The '*Spirit of Enderby*' arrived off the south-west corner of Makira well before dawn and as the light began to improve a small boat came out from the nearby village of Yanuta to meet us. The good news was that the land access problems we had experienced on several previous visits had been resolved and we would be able to bird along the logging road.

With this potential hurdle successfully solved, five zodiacs were lowered and we soon set off for what proved to be a very successful morning ashore, even if the piles of logs at the landing site were another depressing reminder of what 'international business' is doing to these paradise islands.

Indeed over the next few hours, we found an excellent range of species in this rarely visited/birded part of the Solomon Islands with the highlights including White-headed Fruit-dove, Chestnut-bellied Imperial-pigeon, Sooty Myzomela, San Cristobal Melidectes, White-collared Monarch, San Cristobal Starling and Mottled Flowerpecker, all of which are either endemic to Makira or are only found there and a few other islands.

With Solomon Islands Sea-Eagle, Pied Goshawk, Yellow-bibbed Fruit-dove, Red-knobbed Imperial-pigeon and Chestnut-bellied Monarch amongst the other species seen, it was a highly productive

time on the trail and in the late morning, we transferred to the nearby village on Yanuta Island where we received a fantastic welcome from the local community. The *'Spirit of Enderby'* had been the first expedition ship to ever visit Yanuta when we had first come in 2008 and the reception was as warm and friendly as on the first occasion.

After a series of speeches and some dancing by the village girls, we were free to wander. It was truly humbling to visit such a welcoming community and enjoy their hospitality even if it was for only a few short hours.

All too soon, however, it was time to return to the ship and as we headed on towards our next destination, the ship's horn was sounded to thank the villagers for their reception.

### **Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands                      11<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

The ship arrived off Honiara in the middle of the night and well before dawn the zodiacs shuttled us ashore where we boarded a series of vehicles for the journey to Mount Austin. Although this location is less than 30 minutes from downtown Honiara, it is a fantastic site for Solomon Island endemics and despite a mechanical breakdown delaying us somewhat (one of the buses could not get up the steep track !!), shortly after dawn everyone had assembled at the top of the hill.

Assisted by local guides Jerry and Samson, we split into a series of smaller groups and began birding the main trail finding an excellent range of Solomon endemics.

We had been extremely fortunate in finding a high proportion of the specialities on all the other islands we had visited and our luck continued on Guadalcanal with one of the highlights of the morning being some fantastic looks at Ultramarine Kingfisher. This species can be tough to find at Mount Austin, but two pairs were found by the small groups of scattered birders and almost everyone saw one or other of these.

Other species found included Claret-breasted Fruit-dove, Red-knobbed Imperial-pigeon, Ducorps' Cockatoo, Blyth's Hornbill, Cardinal Lory, Steel-blue Flycatcher, Buff-headed Coucal, Black-headed Myzomela, Midget Flowerpecker, Brown-winged Starling, Long-tailed Myna and White-billed Crow.

By late morning, it was time to return to the ship and as we sailed on towards Kolombangara, the seas were somewhat quiet but we had a pleasant surprise in the late afternoon when a lone Heinroth's Shearwater was spotted. The bird was significantly further east than we had ever recorded it on any previous WPO and whilst it was somewhat distant, this was yet another demonstration of how much remains unknown about the seabirds of the West Pacific.

With Pygmy Killer Whales, Risso's Dolphins and two Dwarf Sperm Whales also seen, the day ended on a real high as we continued onwards towards Kolombangara.

### **Kolombangara, Solomon Islands                      12<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

At dawn, Kolombangara was visible on the port side of the ship and as we approached our destination, the village of Kukudu, some of the Wildwings group saw several Heinroth's Shearwater with up to five birds seen in quick succession.

By the time breakfast had concluded, the *'Spirit of Enderby'* was positioned off Kukudu and as soon as a scout zodiac had confirmed arrangements with the villagers, we were taken ashore and began by searching for the Roviana Rail. Unfortunately, our efforts drew a blank and with the sun steadily rising in the sky (along with the temperature !!), we divided into smaller groups and began exploring the various forest trails close to the village.

Although different groups always see different birds, it proved to be an excellent morning with many people seeing a good range of the specialities irrespective of where they went. For some, the highlight was a Roviana Rail, whilst others had superb looks at a male Kolombangara Monarch, a species which is certainly not seen every year. This individual, however, responded extremely well to playback and was even seen displaying, something which very few birders have surely seen !!!

With many of the Wildwings group also seeing White-capped Monarch, Solomon Islands White-eye and Yellow-vented Myzomela, it was an excellent morning and by the time we returned to the ship for lunch, many were very satisfied with their day.

By mid-afternoon and with temperatures cooling (well somewhat...), two options were offered, either a return ashore to continue the search for the Rail and any other missing endemics, or a zodiac cruise through the mangroves a little to the north of Kukudu.

Those who went back to the village had a productive time and most who had missed the rail in the morning got some excellent looks at it, as well as some of the other specialities. The mangrove zodiac cruise was also a considerable success with Oriental Hobby, Northern Melanesian Cuckoo-shrike and Little Kingfisher amongst the species seen.

By early evening and with the sun having set and the sky darkening, the last of the zodiacs headed back to the ship and our time in the Solomon Islands had sadly come to an end. Our four days ashore had, however, been extremely successful with over 30 endemic species plus a host of other range-restricted birds seen.

#### **At sea: Kolombangara, Solomon Islands – Chuuk, Micronesia 13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

The following morning (13<sup>th</sup> April) we awoke with the south-west corner of Bougainville off our starboard bow and there was a sense of anticipation and excitement, as we knew the waters we would be traversing over the next couple of days would be our only chance for one of the least known seabirds in the world, ie Beck's Petrel.

As we cruised up the western coast of Bougainville, our initial target was to get better looks at Heinroth's Shearwater and two birds duly obliged with some decent views of this diminutive seabird.

Several Grey-backed Terns were also seen but this species rarely comes close to ships and we were constantly frustrated as the birds would take off from pieces of driftwood as we got closer – we would have to wait another week for some better views.....

Several species of cetaceans were also seen including False Killer Whales, Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins, Spinner Dolphins and Pantropical Spotted Dolphins. With the WPO having now seen fifteen species of cetacean in these waters over the years, this area truly is one of the world's best places for the biodiversity of whales and dolphins.

The most unexpected sighting of the day, however, was a Sacred Kingfisher which spent several minutes flying round the ship before eventually landing. Clearly this was a somewhat lost migrant....

In the late afternoon and as we neared the northern end of Bougainville, a Beck's Petrel was spotted. Unfortunately, it soon became somewhat distant but even at several hundred metres the jizz and flight action of this major target was apparent, although with nobody getting satisfactory views and dusk approaching, we knew we would have to wait for the morning for another chance.

Shortly after dawn on the following day (14<sup>th</sup> April), the ship was drifting off Cap St George at the south-east tip of New Ireland and we laid a vast slick of oil and fish guts.

With only a gentle breeze, conditions were not exactly ideal but any concerns that we might struggle to find Beck's Petrel were put to rest when those on the top deck spotted a *Pseudobulweria* flying directly towards the slick. It quickly became apparent that this was indeed a Beck's Petrel and we were privileged to have one of the least known seabirds not far from the vessel.

Unfortunately the bird did not stay all that long and with little else showing much interest in the oil and fish guts, the decision was eventually taken to head northwards. In the late afternoon, another slick was, therefore, laid and almost immediately several *Pseudobulwerias* appeared and the Captain turned the ship and we had some great looks at a minimum of three Beck's Petrels. Without doubt, it was 'mission accomplished' for this leg of the voyage.

Although the next couple of days were undeniably quiet (we had entered the first part of the "Dead Zone"!!), there were still birds to look for with White-tailed Tropicbird, Wedge-tailed and Short-tailed Shearwaters and Sooty Tern amongst the species seen.

As we approached Chuuk on 17 April, the number of seabirds began to increase with four Bulwer's Petrels amongst the species spotted. For many, however, the small shearwaters were a priority as the birds here are distinctly different from some of the other taxa within the Tropical Shearwater complex. Nicknamed "Atoll Shearwaters" on previous WPO voyages, unfortunately, only two distant individuals were seen but we knew there would be a further opportunity to look for these birds when we left the Chuuk Lagoon the following afternoon.

By late afternoon, we were tied up at the wharf on the main island on Weno and the Chuukese officials were, for once, very efficient with the clearance formalities and we were soon able to head ashore and explore. Indeed, by dusk many of the group had seen Micronesian Myzomela, Caroline Islands Swiftlet, Micronesian Starling, Crimson-crowned Fruit-dove and most surprisingly of all, some great looks at Caroline Islands Ground-dove.

## **Chuuk, Micronesia**

**18<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

Shortly after dawn, some of the Wildwings group were aboard three zodiacs for an 'expedition-style' visit to Tol South, an island the WPO had only visited on a couple of previous occasions.

Based on previous visits, we knew the climb would be the toughest of the voyage with an extremely steep trail, wet and slippery rocks plus a stream to cross, but all of this had to be negotiated as we needed to reach a reasonable altitude to stand a decent chance of finding our principle targets, the Faichuuk White-eye (critically endangered) and Chuuk Monarch (endangered).



Having successfully navigated the worst parts of the trail, those at the head of the group stopped at about 120m elevation for a short break and were delighted to find a pair of Monarchs including a stunning male. It was a few moments before the backmarkers caught up but fortunately everyone saw at least one bird before the heavens quite literally opened and we were subjected to a truly tropical deluge.

Further along the trail, we tried a recording of Faichuuk White-eye and a pair of these chocolate brown birds with their half moon eye-rings and orange legs then appeared. We had succeeded in finding both our targets in record time and after continuing along the path for another couple of hundred metres, the decision was taken to head back to the landing site. A wise decision indeed as the wind had got up considerably since 6am and it was a decidedly bumpy 2.5 hour ride back to Weno and the ship.

For those not on the excursion to Tol South, a number of options were available on Weno and most started the day by visiting Japanese Gun where all of the Caroline Islands endemics can be found. The Ground-dove, however, proved tricky for some, but perseverance paid off and in the end all the group caught up with this fine endemic.

By late afternoon everyone was back on the ship and as we cruised through the exit in the Chuuk Reef, we saw several "Atoll Shearwaters" with some passing close to the bows in the gathering gloom. It had been an excellent and highly productive visit to this historic part of the West Pacific.

**At sea: Chuuk, Micronesia – Bonin Islands, Japan      19<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

The journey from Chuuk to the Bonin Islands can, at times, be somewhat birdless (indeed, it is known as the second part of the "Dead Zone" by the expedition staff), however, as the ship headed north, we began to pick up a number of new species, with our first Matsudaira's Storm-petrels sighted on 20<sup>th</sup> April, a good day or two further south than when this species is usually first encountered.

The following day we also saw our first Bonin Petrels, the last of the *Pterodromas* we would see on the cruise.

Passing the Northern Mariana Islands, the number of birds began to increase and we knew we were finally back into seas with good numbers of birds. There were also two pleasant surprises on 21<sup>st</sup> April with the first of these being several Grey-backed Terns, a species which only breeds in small numbers on these islands. The best sighting, however, was a Christmas Shearwater which made a brief, but close, pass along the port side of the ship allowing some excellent photos to be taken. This was a new seabird for the WPO and a tick for almost everyone.

By the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> April, we were off the south-east corner of the Bonin Islands and the day proved highly memorable with Black-footed Albatross and Tristram's Storm-petrel amongst the species seen. A lucky few also saw a small white-faced black-and-white shearwater which was presumably Bryan's Shearwater, a species which was only described in 2011 and had only been discovered in the Bonins in recent months.

**At sea: Torishima      25<sup>th</sup> May 2012**

With the Japanese authorities refusing to reverse their policy (introduced in 2010) of not permitting the *'Spirit of Enderby'* to clear into Japan at the Bonin Islands, we had to stay 12 nautical miles off Torishima and, as a result, everyone knew that finding Short-tailed Albatross could be a challenge, especially with only one bird having been seen in 2011.....

Shortly after breakfast, therefore, chumming began off the stern as the ship steadily closed in on our waypoint off the eastern side of the island. Eventually some distant Short-tailed Albatrosses were spotted but these seemed utterly disinterested in the opportunity for an easy feed behind the ship and at first our views of this iconic bird were far from satisfactory. Indeed, it would be into the afternoon before our patience was rewarded and we got some great looks at this majestic species. For many, the highlight was a magnificent adult with its golden head but birds in several other plumages were also seen.

As well as the albatrosses, another significant sighting was a pod of beaked whales which were found in the late afternoon whilst we drifted east of Torishima. These were seen only a matter of miles from where another pod had been observed in 2011 and like those animals, the male was black, with no obvious scratch markings or other distinguishing patterning. With very few species known from these waters, these appeared to be Ginkgo-toothed Beaked Whales, a species which is extremely poorly known.

In some respects, however, the surprise of the day were two landbirds which flew past the ship, a female Siberian Rubythroat which made several laps of the vessel before disappearing and a Black-faced Bunting of the Japanese subspecies *personata*. What either of these were doing so far off their normal migration routes was a mystery but the day certainly belonged to the albatrosses.

**At sea: Torishima – Yokohama      26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> April 2012**

Having drifted off Torishima overnight, we had high hopes of finding some more Short-tailed Albatrosses before heading north and our luck was truly in when two birds were spotted shortly after dawn. Once again, one of these was a fine adult and as we cruised northward, the day total eventually reached ten different individuals. We had been incredibly fortunate to have had such a fine showing by this extremely rare bird.

Shortly after dawn of the following day (27<sup>th</sup> April), Miyake-jima was only a few miles ahead of us and as we got closer to the offshore stacks where Japanese Murrelet breed, just about everyone was out on deck to look for this last WPO speciality.

On previous visits, we had seen small parties of these endangered alcids close to the islets and several birds could indeed be seen close to the shore. When two were spotted floating on the sea directly ahead of the ship, our luck held as these stayed on the surface until the *'Spirit of Enderby'* was only a matter of metres from them. Then instead of taking flight, they dived and we could watch them 'flying away' underneath the surface !!!

With the last of the WPO's 'big birds' now seen, thoughts turned to Laysan Albatross, a species which is only seen occasionally and it was clear that WPO 2012 would end on an undoubted high with at least three of these tricky birds found as the ship headed towards Tokyo Bay. With one

making a very close pass down the port side of the ship and another ignoring the vessel to feed on some offal a matter of metres off the same side, we entered Tokyo Bay to high spirits.

Our seabirding opportunities were, however, not yet over, as Ancient Murrelet and Rhinoceros Auklet as well as a selection of gulls (Vega, Slaty-backed and Black-tailed) were the final new seabirds of the expedition.

By the late afternoon, the ship was at anchor a matter of miles from where we would disembark the following morning and our voyage was practically over. We had travelled almost 9,000 kms and knew we had been privileged to see an amazing range of rarely seen and poorly known species. WPO 2012 had certainly lived up to expectations.

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