

PEREGRINE BIRD TOURS

DARWIN and ASHMORE REEF

12TH – 22ND OCTOBER 2010

TOUR REPORT

LEADERS: Chris Doughty, Simon Mustoe and Niven McCrie, in Darwin.

Our tour to Ashmore Reef was without doubt, the most successful birding tour to Ashmore Reef so far. The tour began with a superb birding day in Darwin, where the highlights included a very obliging Chestnut Rail and a superb Rainbow Pitta. The three and a half days at sea, in order to reach Ashmore Reef, were fairly calm and very rewarding. We enjoyed good looks at Bulwer's Petrel and both Matsudaira's and Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels and a party of three Long-tailed Jaegers. However, our best find was a flock of 35 or so Arabian Shearwaters, a species that breeds on two islands off the coast of Yemen and one island in the Comoro Islands. Their wintering area has remained unknown for decades, and we managed to find it, right here in Australian waters. So the bird is a new species to any Australian territory. We also observed during the tour a total of 8 species of whales and dolphins, including a group of the rarely observed Omura's Whale, several of them with calves, so this area is most probably an import breeding area for this endangered species. At the reef itself, West Island was overflowing with rare birds, which included Oriental Plover, Little Curlew, Long-toed Stint, Little Stint, Grey Wagtail, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Island Monarch, Tiger Shrike, a juvenile Dark-sided Flycatcher, which had only previously been seen on Australian territory, on one occasion, on the Cocos Keeling Islands, and best of all, yet another new bird for Australia, the Grey-streaked Flycatcher. To put this tour into perspective; we found a new wintering seabird for Australia, a new species of passerine for Australia, four species recorded less than five times, 20 species of waders and a good selection of whales and dolphins. What an amazing tour.

The tour began with a full days birding in hot tropical Darwin, in the 'Top End'. The rains had come early this year and it had already been raining on a daily basis, for the past couple of weeks. When the day dawned it was already raining heavily, however, fortunately for us, the rain did not last long and we enjoyed a clear sunny day. Niven McCrie, the top birder in Darwin, was our local guide for the day and we began our days birding in the Darwin Botanical Gardens where we quickly saw Australian White Ibis, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Masked Lapwing, Forest Kingfisher, Black-faced and White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes, Helmeted and Little Friarbirds, Figbird, Spangled Drongo and Magpie-lark. Our next port of call was the rocky coastline at Nightcliff, a shimmering tropical beach, which is a well known high tide roost, right in the suburbs of Darwin. The birding was very lively and we quickly added Pied Cormorant, an uncommon bird in Darwin, as well as Eastern Reef-Egret, Striated Heron, Pacific Golden-Plover, Lesser and Greater Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone, Eastern Curlew, Whimbrel, Grey-tailed Tattler, Common and Terek Sandpipers, Great Knot, Red-necked Stint, Silver Gull, White-

winged Black, Little, Crested and Lesser-crested Terns, Torresian Imperial-Pigeon, Peaceful and Bar-shouldered Doves, Rainbow Lorikeet, Sacred and Collared Kingfishers, Rainbow Bee-eater and Brown and Rufous-banded Honeyeaters. We then traveled to Buffalo Creek, a mangrove lined tidal creek, where we were hopeful of finding the very uncommon and very seldom seen Chestnut Rail. While watching for the rail as the tide turned, we enjoyed observing a supporting cast of Great and Little Egrets, Straw-necked Ibis, Pacific Baza, Black, Brahminy and Whistling Kites, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Caspian Tern, Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, Red-winged Parrot, Little Bronze-Cuckoo, Pheasant Coucal; Azure Kingfisher, Dollarbird, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher, Brown Whistler, Leaden Flycatcher, Dusky Honeyeater, Yellow Oriole, White-breasted Woodswallow, Black Butcherbird and Torresian Crow. Buffalo Creek is a superb place to find birds which are endemic to the mangroves, and we were not to be disappointed, one by one, they slowly revealed themselves, they included Shining Flycatcher, Mangrove Grey Fantail, Large-billed and Green-backed Gerygones, Red-headed Honeyeater and Yellow White-eye. The tide had just turned it was time to go and look for Chestnut Rail along the mud that was about to be exposed along Buffalo Creek. In no time at all, we were watching a very sprightly and surprisingly obliging Chestnut Rail, walking along on the exposed mud, in full view. This was undoubtedly the highlight of our days birding in Darwin. Our next stop, as the heat saturated us, was Knucky Lagoon. Here new birds for us included Australasian Grebe, Australian Darter, Little Pied and Little Black Cormorants, Intermediate Egret, Royal Spoonbill, Magpie Goose, Wandering Whistling-Duck, Pacific Black Duck, Green Pygmy-goose, Comb-crested Jacana, White-headed Stilt, Australian Pratincole, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Brush Cuckoo, Paperbark Flycatcher and somewhat surprisingly a fine flock of Silver-crowned Friarbirds, who were feeding in a flowering tree. In a nearby patch of bush, we added Bush Thick-knee, Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Galah, Grey-crowned Babbler, Blue-faced, White-gaped and White-throated Honeyeaters and a fine looking Silver-backed Butcherbird. A quick stop at the Darwin Rubbish Tip produced Pied Heron and Black-necked Stork. Our final port of call was the East Point Reserve, where new birds for the day included Little Corella, a stunning Rainbow Pitta, surely one of the prettiest birds in Australia; White-winged Triller, Northern Fantail, Bar-breasted Honeyeater, Striated Pardalote and Double-barred and Long-tailed Finches. We also saw Agile Wallabies here, which was our first mammal for the tour. It was now time to drive to Mandoorah Harbour at Cullen Bay, from where we would commence the next leg of our journey, as we sailed on the Auriga Bay II, to Ashmore Reef. An Osprey flew over as we were boarding the boat and as we set sail, three Brown Boobys were observed sitting on a small marker buoy.

It took almost four days to reach Ashmore Reef, and we very much enjoyed our time looking at seabirds along the way. Our excitement began not far out of Darwin, when we crossed one of the richest, but surprisingly, least known areas of ocean in the world. Here we found a wintering seabird that had never been previously recorded in Australian waters. We saw approximately 35 Arabian Shearwaters *Puffinus persicus*, which had traveled all the way from the Gulf of Oman. Other seabirds during the journey included Bulwer's Petrel, Streaked Shearwater, Wilson's, Matsudaira's and Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels, Masked Booby, Great and Lesser Frigatebirds, White-winged Black, Common,

Sooty, Bridled and Little Terns, Brown and Black Noddies and Long-tailed Jaeger. This is a superb selection of seabirds. At one stage of our journey an exhausted Barn Swallow came and sat on the boat and on another occasion, an exhausted juvenile Sooty Tern slept on the boat one night.

By the time we reached Ashmore Reef, we had encountered four species of dolphins, Bottlenose, Long-snouted Spinner, Pantropical Spotted and Risso's. These were a delight to watch, and as we neared Ashmore Reef we enjoyed a superb encounter with a small pod of False Killer Whales, one of which breached right out of the water. This was a tremendous thrill, but our best find by far, was four groups of 15 or so Omura's Whales, several of which had newborn calves with them. Omura's Whale is a recently described species of baleen whale, and almost nothing is known about it.

We were permitted to land on Ashmore Reef in return for collecting bird count data for the islands, which are famous for their seabirds and as a staging post for waders migrating from Siberia. Even more importantly; it also gave us a chance to search for migrating birds from Asia, which had 'overshot' their wintering grounds and ended up on Ashmore Reef. We were not to be disappointed.

On our first day on Ashmore Reef, we were greeted by strong northerly winds, lightning, thunder and heavy rain which mainly skirted the island. Although the weather was not ideal for birding, it was perfect conditions to force migrating birds, to make land fall, and rest and build up their strength, until weather conditions improved. On our first day on West Island we were greeted immediately by a Grey Wagtail, which was joined by a second bird, on the following day. Then, a Grey-streaked Flycatcher hopped up in front of us and showed very well indeed. This was a new bird for Australia; and caused tremendous excitement amongst the group. Later in the day we found a second adult and a juvenile flycatcher, which we initially thought to be another Grey-streaked Flycatcher. Following a great deal of research, I am now sure that the bird was a juvenile Dark-sided Flycatcher, which is only the second record for this species on Australian territory. After that came the Arafura Fantails, three in all, feeding with two Australian Yellow White-eyes. The fantails were not the Australian breeding race, but an obscure race, from Indonesia. Our next rarity was a couple of Arctic Warblers and this was followed shortly by the surprise find of a Spectacled Monarch, the first time this species has ever been recorded on Ashmore Reef. This bird will almost certainly have come from Timor, where it is a fairly common bird, and not from the east coast of Australia. The island was awash with waders; including a fine selection of rarities, which included a single Little Stint which was present on the rock platform next to the Grey Wagtail. In the grassland in the centre of the island, we found three Oriental Plovers, two Little Curlews and a single Long-toed Stint. More common waders included Pacific Golden-Plover, Lesser and Greater Sandpipers, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Common, Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers, Grey-tailed Tattler, Ruddy Turnstone, Great Knot, Sanderling and Red-necked Stint. There must have been 15-20 Oriental Cuckoos and about 15 Eastern Yellow Wagtails, as well as the usual trickle of migrating Barn Swallows and Fork-tailed Swifts. Resident birds included superb Red-tailed and White-tailed Tropicbirds, Red-footed Booby, Little Egret, Eastern Reef-Egret, Rufous Night-Heron, Buff-banded Rail,

Australian Pratincole, Gull-billed Tern, Sacred and Collared Kingfishers, Rainbow Bee-eater and Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike. On our second day on Ashmore Reef, we had an exciting new find, an adult Island Monarch; this is the fifth record of this beautiful bird for Australia, all sightings are from Ashmore Reef. A second new bird also turned up today, this was a splendid adult White-headed Stilt.

The following day we went out to Middle Island, where there are large numbers of breeding boobies and terns. We were allowed to sail around the island in our tinny, but we did not have permission to set foot on the island. We had to make two trips, half the group in the first boat load and the other half in the second. Those in the first tinny, added a new bird for our visit to Ashmore Reef, they found a Common Greenshank. As the second group was visiting Middle Island, we received a radio message that the first group had found a Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, on West Island! Needless to say, the second group headed for West Island as quickly as we could. Within a few minutes, we were enjoying super looks at an immature Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler; this great rarity has only ever been recorded on Australian territory, from Ashmore Reef. It is a very skulking bird; so we sat and waited for the bird to settle down and start to behave normally. This worked a treat, and soon we were enjoying prolonged views of the bird walking around the base of a large Argusia bush. As we were about to reluctantly leave the island, a juvenile Tiger Shrike popped into view, this is only the third record for Australia. This bird can be uncharacteristically skulking for a shrike, so we stood back and allowed the bird to settle. Once again, this tactic worked perfectly, and we were able to watch this bird perched out in the open, just a few metres away from us.

All that remained was to sail back to Darwin and watch for more seabirds on the way. Unfortunately, we were sailing into a very rough sea and bumped our way, all the way back to Darwin. As is often the case in rough weather, the seabirds seem to know it is coming and stayed clear of the area. This was very much the case on this occasion; we did not add any new seabirds during our journey back to Darwin, but once again, when we were sailing above Flat Top Bank during our third day of the journey, we once again found small numbers of Arabian Shearwaters. On the evening of our last full day at sea, we made an anchorage in Bynoe Harbour, to the west of Darwin, in a very sheltered bay. It was a great respite to have a good night's sleep, without being tossed around.

The following morning, the day dawned bright and sunny and we added several new birds for the cruise. These included a couple of Great Egrets, a single Eastern Curlew, a few Lesser Crested Terns, a few Torresian Imperial-Pigeons, a small flock of Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos and a few pairs of Rainbow Lorikeets. Here we also added both Indo-pacific Humpback and Australian Snubfin Dolphins, bringing the total number of cetaceans sighted, to eight. We then sailed back to Darwin Harbour, where the tour ended.

We had experienced, what is without doubt, the most successful birding tour ever, to Ashmore Reef. The skipper and crew of the Auriga Bay II had been extremely pleasant and co-operative and Simon had been a delight to work with, his boundless enthusiasm

will be remembered by all of us and without his photographs, it would have been virtually impossible to substantiate the many rarities which we had seen.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

The following is a list of the birds and mammals seen on the 12th October in Darwin.

Australasian Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*
Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*
Little Black Cormorant *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*
Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius*
Little Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*
Australian Darter *Anhinga novaehollandiae*
Great Egret *Ardea alba*
Pied Heron *Egretta picata*
Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia*
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Eastern Reef-Egret *Egretta sacra*
Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*
Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*
Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca*
Straw-necked Ibis *Threskiornis spinicollis*
Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*
Magpie Goose *Anseranas semipalmata*
Wandering Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*
Green Pygmy-goose *Nettapus pulchellus*
Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
Pacific Baza *Aviceda subcristata*
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*
Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*
White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*
Orange-footed Scrubfowl *Megapodius reinwardt*
Chestnut Rail *Eulabeornis castaneiventris*
Comb-crested Jacana *Irediparra gallinacea*
White-headed Stilt *Himantopus leucocephalus*
Bush Thick-knee *Burhinus grallarius*
Australian Pratincole *Stiltia isabella*
Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles*
Pacific Golden-Plover *Pluvialis fulva*
Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus*
Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii*
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Grey-tailed Tattler *Heterosceles brevipes*
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*
Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*
Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*
Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*
Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*
White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*
Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida*
Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis*
Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus regina*
Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa*
Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo *Calyptorhynchus banksii*
Galah *Eolophus roseicapillus*
Little Corella *Cacatua sanguinea*
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*
Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus*
Red-winged Parrot *Aprosmictus erythropterus*
Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus*
Little Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx minutillus*
Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus*
Azure Kingfisher *Alcedo azurea*
Forest Kingfisher *Todirhamphus macleayii*
Collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris*
Sacred Kingfisher *Todirhamphus sanctus*
Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatus*
Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis*
Rainbow Pitta *Pitta iris*
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*
White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis*
White-winged Triller *Lalage tricolor*
Northern Fantail *Rhipidura rufiventris*
Mangrove Grey Fantail *Rhipidura phasiana*
Leaden Flycatcher *Myiagra rubecula*
Paperbark Flycatcher *Myiagra nana* Currently treated as a full species, in Clements checklist of the Birds of the World.
Shining Flycatcher *Myiagra alecto*
Lemon-bellied Flycatcher *Microeca flavigaster*
Brown Whistler *Pachycephala simplex*
Grey-crowned Babbler *Pomatostomus temporalis*
Green-backed Gerygone *Gerygone chloronotus*
Large-billed Gerygone *Gerygone magnirostris*
Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus*
Yellow White-eye *Zosterops luteus*
Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta*
Dusky Honeyeater *Myzomela obscura*
Red-headed Honeyeater *Myzomela erythrocephala*
White-gaped Honeyeater *Lichenostomus unicolor*
White-throated Honeyeater *Melithreptus albogularis*

Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis*
Helmeted Friarbird *Philemon buceroides*
Silver-crowned Friarbird *Philemon argenticeps*
Bar-breasted Honeyeater *Ramsayornis fasciatus*
Rufous-banded Honeyeater *Conopophila albogularis*
Blue-faced Honeyeater *Entomyzon cyanotis*
Yellow Oriole *Oriolus flavocinctus*
Figbird *Sphecothebes viridis*
Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus*
Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca*
White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*
Silver-backed Butcherbird *Cracticus argenteus* Currently treated as a full species, in Clements checklist of the Birds of the World.
Black Butcherbird *Cracticus quoyi*
Torresian Crow *Corvus orru*
Double-barred Finch *Taeniopygia bichenovii*
Long-tailed Finch *Poephila acuticauda*

MAMMALS

Agile Wallaby *Macropous agilis*

ASMORE REEF CRUISE

PROCELLARIIDAE

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* We enjoyed a few good sightings of this species on our way out to Ashmore Reef, and we did see one bird on our journey back to Darwin. This species breeds in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and is known to winter in the northern Indian Ocean and off the coast of northwestern Australia. The Reverend James Bulwer (1794-1879) was a Scottish collector, naturalist and conchologist, (the study of mollusk shells). Bulwer collected the petrel which is named after him, in Madeira in 1827.

Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas* Once again we enjoyed several good looks at this species on the way out to Ashmore Reef, combined with a couple of sightings, on the way back. This species breeds in Japan and is regularly encountered off northern Australia, where it winters.

Arabian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus* This species had not been recorded in Australian waters, prior to our sightings on the 13th and 14th October. The wintering grounds of this seabird were totally unknown, up until now. This species breeds on two islands off the coast of Yemen and on one island in the Comoro Islands, between Africa and Madagascar. The photographs taken by Simon, prove conclusively that the birds we saw and photographed, were of this species.

HYDROBATIDAE

Wilson's Storm-Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* We enjoyed many good sightings both on the outward journey to Ashmore Reef and on the way back. This bird is wintering

in this area, from breeding grounds in Antarctica. Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) was a pioneering American ornithologist, and the first to study American birds in their native habitats. As such he is often called the Father of American Ornithology. Born in Scotland, Wilson was imprisoned for libel and following his release in 1794 he emigrated to the United States. From 1808-1813 he published seven volumes of his *American Ornithology*.

Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis* One bird observed and photographed on our journey to Ashmore Reef. This species breeds in Japan and winters mainly off the coast of Southeast Asia and in the northern Indian Ocean. Robert Swinhoe (1836-1877) was born in Calcutta, India, and was sent to England to be educated. He worked in China as a diplomat and during this time he explored a vast area which had not been open previously to any other collector. As a result he discovered new species at the rate of about one per month throughout the more than 19 years he was there. He discovered more than 200 new species of birds.

Matsudaira's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma matsudairae* We enjoyed several good sightings of this species, within the time slot of a couple of hours on the 15th October. This species breeds on Volcano Island, southeast of Japan and winters in the northern Indian Ocean and off the coast of northwestern Australia. Viscount Yorikatsu Matsudaira (1876-1945) was a Japanese ornithologist. He wrote *A Hand-list of the Japanese Birds*, in 1922. Matsudaira's Storm-Petrel only breeds on a few rocky islets off the coast of Japan.

PHAETHONTIDAE

Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* We found small numbers breeding on West Island at Ashmore Reef. A single bird was also observed at sea on the first day of our journey, back to Darwin.

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* We also found small numbers of this species breeding on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

SULIDAE

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra* One bird observed at sea prior to reaching Ashmore Reef, we found small numbers breeding at the reef.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* Small numbers of this species were observed breeding at Ashmore Reef. All of our sightings were of pale morph birds.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* Seen at sea on every day of the tour, and there were large numbers breeding at Ashmore Reef.

FREGATIDAE

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* Small numbers observed at sea and at Ashmore Reef.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* Seen almost daily at sea, and large numbers were nesting on Ashmore Reef.

ARDEIDAE

Great Egret *Ardea alba* A couple of birds were observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Small numbers of this species were observed breeding on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Eastern Reef-Egret *Egretta sacra* One bird was observed at sea, on the way to Ashmore Reef. Dozens of birds were nesting on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Rufous Night-Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus* We observed small numbers on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, where they were probably breeding.

RALLIDAE

Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* Commonly encountered during our time on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

White-headed Stilt *Himantopus leucocephalus* An adult bird was observed well on the 17th October, on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

GLAREOLIDAE

Australian Pratincole *Stiltia isabella* Up to 10 birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our time there.

CHARADRIIDAE

Pacific Golden-Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Proved to be common during our time on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus* A few birds present on West Island, during our time at Ashmore Reef.

Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii* Up to 100 birds present around West Island, during our time at Ashmore Reef.

Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* A maximum of three birds were counted on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* A solitary bird was observed on West Island, at Ashmore Reef on the 16th October.

Little Curlew *Numenius minutus* Two birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our time there.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Sixty or so birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis* A single bird was observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A single bird was observed at Middle Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* One bird seen at sea on our way to Ashmore Reef. Small numbers were present on West Island, during the time we were there.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Heterosceles brevipes* Commonly encountered around the rocky coastline of West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* This was also a common species at West Island,

and we saw a small flock in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* A single bird was present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef on the 16th and 17th October.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* Fifty or so birds were found at the tide line, during the three days we spent on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* Seventy or so birds were observed during our time on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* A single Little Stint was present amongst the Red-necked Stints on the 16th October, on West Island, at Ashmore Reef. This species is a vagrant to Australia.

Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta* A single Long-toed Stint was present amongst the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, in grassland, in the centre of West Island, on Ashmore Reef. The Long-toed Stint is recorded annually in Australia, in very small numbers.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata* Forty or so birds, many of them immatures were present in grassland, in the centre of West Island, on Ashmore Reef.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* A few birds were present on West Island, Ashmore Reef, on the 16th and 17th October.

STERCORARIIDAE

Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* Three birds were observed and Photographed sitting together on the ocean, on a very calm sea on the 14th October, as we sailed towards Ashmore Reef.

STERNIDAE

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica* A single bird was present on West Island, Ashmore Reef, on the 16th October.

Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* A few birds were present in Bynoe Harbour, near Darwin.

Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* A single bird was observed at sea off Darwin on the 12th October. A couple were observed at sea on the 15th October and up to 40 or so birds were present at West Island, on Ashmore Reef. A handful of birds were observed at sea on the 21st and small numbers were present in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Seen almost daily at sea, with small numbers present at Ashmore Reef and in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* Seen as sea on the 15th October, small numbers were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef and a few were observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* Small numbers seen almost daily at sea and small numbers were present on West Island at Ashmore Reef.

Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata* Very small numbers present at sea during our journey to Ashmore Reef, including an exhausted juvenile, which spent the night on the boat. A few birds were observed on West Island, these were mainly juvenile

birds, that were in a poor state of health.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* Small numbers observed on most of the days we were at sea. Up to 40 or so birds were present, hawking for insects on West Island at Ashmore Reef. Many of the birds were in an exhausted state, a number sadly, were dead or dying.

Black Noddy *Anous minutus* Seen at sea the day before we reached Ashmore Reef, and small numbers were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* Seen at sea the day before we reached Ashmore Reef, and small numbers were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

COLUMBIDAE

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoea* A few birds were observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

CACATUIDAE

Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo *Calyptorhynchus banksii* A small flock was observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

PSITTACIDAE

Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* A few pairs were observed in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

CUCULIDAE

Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus* Up to 20 or so birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our time there.

APODIDAE

Fork-tailed Swift *Apus pacificus* Small numbers observed migrating over the sea, both on the outward and homeward journeys from Ashmore Reef. Small numbers were observed daily flying over Ashmore Reef.

ALCEDINIDAE

Collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris* One was present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during the three days we were there.

Sacred Kingfisher *Todirhamphus sanctus* Up to 30 or so birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, while we were there.

MEROPIDAE

Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatus* Up to 30 or so birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, while we were there. A small flock was observed migrating south, while we were out at sea on the 19th October.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* An exhausted bird sat on the boat for a short period on the 13th October. Small numbers were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef,

during the time we were there. A single bird was observed migrating south on the 21st October, while we were at sea.

MOTACILLIDAE

Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla macronyx* Up to 15 Eastern Yellow Wagtails were present in grassland, in the centre of West Island, on Ashmore Reef. The Eastern Yellow Wagtail is recorded annually in Australia, in very small numbers.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* A single bird was observed on our first day at West Island, on Ashmore Reef, with an additional bird present, during the next two days. The Grey Wagtail is normally recorded annually in Australia, but in very small numbers.

CAMPEPHAGIDAE

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae* Three birds present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our first two days there.

SYLVIIDAE

Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella ochotensis* We observed a single immature bird very well during our last day on West Island, at Ashmore Reef. There are a handful of records of this species from Australia, all are from Ashmore Reef. Alexander Theodor von Middendorff (1815-1894) was a German-Russian traveler and naturalist, who was a member of the St. Petersburg cademy, of Sciences. From 1842 to 1845 Middendorff journeyed throughout Siberia and the surrounding regions.

Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* Up to two birds were present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our time there. The Arctic Warbler is an annual visitor to Ashmore Reef, in very small numbers. It very occasionally reaches the mainland of Australia.

MUSCICAPIDAE

Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta* Never before recorded on Australian territory; somewhat amazingly, there were two adult birds present on West Island, at Ashmore Reef, during our time there.

Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* Only one previous record for Australia, from the Cocos Keeling Islands. A juvenile of this species was present during all three days we visited West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

RHIPIDURIDAE

Arafura Fantail *Rhipidura dryas* Never before recorded on Ashmore Reef; yet again, three individuals were present during our time on West Island, at Ashmore Reef. The birds were not of the Australian race, they were one of the Indonesian races.

MONARCHIDAE

Island Monarch *Monarcha cinerascens* A single bird was present during the last two days of our visit to West Island, on Ashmore Reef. This bird is a very occasional visitor to Ashmore Reef.

Spectacled Monarch *Monarcha trivirgatus* Never before recorded on Ashmore Reef; an adult bird was present on West Island, on the 16th October. This bird is most likely to have come from nearby Timor, rather than from the east coast of Australia.

ZOSTEROPIDAE

Yellow White-eye *Zosterops luteus* Two birds were present during our time on West Island, at Ashmore Reef.

LANIIDAE

Tiger Shrike *Lanius tigrinus* A single immature bird was present on our last day on West Island, at Ashmore Reef. This is only the third record for Australia, and all have occurred on Ashmore Reef. This bird was voted 'bird of the tour' by tour participants.

MAMMALS

Omura's Whale *Balaenoptera omurai* Omura's Whale, was discovered and described for the first time by three Japanese scientists in 2003. The DNA of hunted whales

was used for analysis and led to the discovery of this new species. Additional DNA studies were carried out in 2006 and the Omura's Whale was accepted as a new species to science. Omura's Whale looks similar to the Bryde's Whale, and at first was thought to be a small form of this species, however, the DNA studies show it evolved entirely independently of Bryde's Whale. Little to nothing is known about this new species of whale. Our sightings of several Omura's Whales with calves, is an important find and adds to our very limited knowledge, of what must surely be, a very endangered species.

False Killer Whale *Pseudorca crassidens* This species was first recognized from a calcified skeleton, found in Lincolnshire, England. It was thought to be extinct until there was a mass stranding of this species, in Germany in 1860. We enjoyed watching a small pod of these whales, on our way to Ashmore Reef. One of the whales breached vertically out of the water and appeared, as though it was standing on its tail.

Indo-Pacific Hump-backed Dolphin *Sousa chinensis* A couple of these dolphins were observed near our boat in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.

Long-snouted Spinner Dolphin *Stenella longirostris* We enjoyed good looks at a pod of these dolphins on our way out to Ashmore Reef. Unfortunately, they did not breach and spin for us, as this species often does.

Pantropical Spotted Dolphin *Stenella attenuate* A small pod was seen fairly well during our journey out to Ashmore Reef. A number stayed on the surface for quite some time.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* We enjoyed a number of good sightings of this species on both journeys to and from Ashmore Reef. On one occasion, several of these dolphins came to ride on the bow line of the ship.

Risso's Dolphin *Grampus griseus* We had a brief sighting of a couple of these dolphins, on our way out to Ashmore Reef.

Australian Snub-fin Dolphin *Orcaella heinsohni* This dolphin is endemic to Australia and occurs in coastal waters of the tropical north. It closely resembles the Irrawaddy Dolphin and is in the same genus, *Orcaella*. It was not described as a separate species until 2005. The Australian Snubfin is tri-coloured, while the Irrawaddy Dolphin only has two colours on its skin. We enjoyed many close sightings of Australia's only endemic dolphin, in Bynoe Harbour, close to Darwin.