Birds observed at sea in the Indian Ocean

In this short paper I present a daily account of the birds observed from passenger ships on a return voyage from Durban, Natal, to Bombay, India. Whilst at sea the majority of daylight hours was spent looking for seabirds from the forepeak which was found to be the best vantage point for observation. Identification at sea can at times be difficult because some pelagic seabirds tend to steer clear of ships and therefore can only be seen at long range. A 15-60 power telescope mounted on a rifle butt was invaluable for birds far off. Photography proved well-nigh impossible because of the pitching and rolling of the ship but on occasions when birds came on board in an exhausted condition they were approachable enough to be caught as well as photographed. One White Wagtail Motacilla alba came on board at Karachi, Pakistan, and stayed with the ship until it berthed in Mombasa, Kenya. It appeared to find plenty to eat and generally frequented the deck outside the galley where the cooks threw it scraps of food.

No chart positions were available for the northbound journey but estimates for the noon positions are provided. I left Durban on 21 September 1974 at 1800 hrs local time. A few Greyheaded Gulls Larus cirrocephalus and several Kelp Gulls L. dominicanus followed the ship Asia out of the harbour.


23 Sept. ca. 19°55’S: Greater Frigate Bird Fregata minor 1, Sooty Tern S. fuscata 6.

24 Sept. ca. 14°10’S: Whitebellied Stormpetrel Fregetta grallaria 2, Sooty Tern 400.

25 Sept. ca. 8°25’S: Masked Booby Sula dactylatra 3, Sooty Tern 120.

26 Sept.: Arrived Mombasa, Kenya, at 0500 hrs local time and entered the harbour at 0930 hrs. Species seen just offshore were Cape Pigeon 1, Sooty Gull L. hemprichii 30, Bridled Tern Sterna anaethetus 20, Whitecheeked Tern S. repressa ca. 100, Roseate Tern S. dougallii 25, Little Tern S. albinus 10, Lesser Black-backed Gull L. fuscus 1 imm.

Left Mombasa 27 Sept. at 0200 hrs: Absence of birds at sea except for four Sooty Terns in the late afternoon.

28 Sept. ca. 1°N 48'E: No birds seen.

29 Sept. ca. 7°N 53'E: Jouanin’s Petrel Bulweria fallax 2, Masked Booby 3, Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava 1 on board, Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe 1 on board.
Figure 1

Approximate routes of the Asia and Karanja in the Indian Ocean in 1974
30 Sept. ca. 11°N 58°E : Jouanin's Petrel 2, Masked Booby 1, Turtle Dove Streptopelia turtur 1 imm. on board.

1 Oct. ca. 16°N 64°E : Jouanin's Petrel 2, Whitebellied Storm-petrel 2, Hobby Falco subbuteo 1, Greenshank Tringa nebularia 1, Turtle Dove and Yellow Wagtail still on board, Redthroated Pipit Anthus cervinus 1.


Left Bombay, India, 21 November 1974 at 1300 hrs on the Karanja. Chart positions are for midday.


26 Nov. 16°35'N 59°28'E : Masked Booby 35, Brown Booby 60, Quail Coturnix coturnix one bird tried to land on the side of the ship but fell into the sea and did not reappear on the surface, White Wagtail 1.

27 Nov. 11°48'N 55°11'E : Jouanin's Petrel 2, Redbilled Tropicbird Phaethon aethereus 25, Masked Booby 1, Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax 1 imm., White Wagtail 1.

28 Nov. 07°18'N 51°23'E : Audubon's Shearwater Puffinus tenuirostris 3, Redbilled Tropicbird 2, Whitetailed Tropic Bird Phaethon lepturus 4, Black Tern Chlidonias niger 1, Houbara Bustard Chlamydotis undulata one followed the ship for several hours, Rednecked Phalarope Phalaropus lobatus 4, White Wagtail 1.

29 Nov. 02°28'N 47°06'E : Noddy Tern Anous sp. 4, Sooty Tern 60, Quail 1, Blue-eared Bee-eater Merops superciliosus 6 on board, White Wagtail 1.

30 Nov. 01°54'S 42°46'E : Greater Frigate Bird 1, Swift Tern 5, Sooty Tern 10, Creamcoloured Courser Cursorius cursor 1. This bird met the same fate as the Quail on 26 Nov.
1 Dec. : Arrived Mombasa at 0600 hrs. The White Wagtail was seen to fly ashore towards Nyala Beach.


3 Dec. 06°03'S 39°36'E : Sooty Gull 25, Lesser Blackbacked Gull 40, terns Sterna sp. 120, Lesser Crested Tern 4, Sooty Tern 80.

4 Dec. 07°04'S 40°03'E : Redfooted Falcon Falco vespertinus 1, Sooty Tern 400.

5 Dec. 14°04'S 40°03'E : Common/Arctic Tern 4 500, Roseate Tern 300, Sandwich Tern 6, Little Tern 40, Sooty Tern 250.

6 Dec. : No birds present at sea.


13 Dec. 24°48'S 35°17'E : Yellownosed Albatross Diomedea exulans 2 Imm., Greatwinged Petrel 40, Fleshfooted Shearwater 4, Sooty Tern 130.


Many more birds were seen from the ship but were too far away for positive identification. Very few pelagic birds were seen feeding at sea except for the terns and skuas. The Sooty Terns avoided the ship during the day but at night they could frequently be heard calling their distinctive "wideawake" call around the stern where they sometimes roosted.

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J.C. Sinclair
FitzPatrick Institute
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch 7700