

Sea watching, Dakar - 2nd Nov to 7th Nov 2005

By Dave Thurlow

Introduction

This trip was an add-on, combined with a 12-day tour to Gambia with Naturetrek. The Naturetrek tour ended on the afternoon of the 1st; I flew with Air Senegal on the evening of the 1st, a convenient option but not a cheap one as the return flight Banjul-Dakar now costs £200!

Method

A total of hours 49 hrs, 10 mins seawatching was amassed over a six-day period. Observations were made from either the Club Le Calao or the Ile de N'Gor. All observations were made with a Leica Televid 62mm with 32XWA and occasional use of 16X-45X zoom. A UV filter was used primarily as protection against the constant drift of sea spray. All counts are actual except for the count of Cory's/Scopoli's on the 7th (note 1) which was an estimate based on a sample of passage rates per minute. All petrels, shearwaters, gannets, skuas and Sabine's Gulls were logged, with watches split into morning (total 30 hrs, 35 mins) and afternoon (total 18 hrs, 35 mins). Terns were not counted although some general observations are given below.

I was joined by Kevin Ray on the 6th.

Weather conditions

The study period was dominated by the harmattan wind resulting in force 4 or 5 onshore winds for the entire six-day period. Visibility was good although haze was a slight problem at mid-day. Light was best in the mornings/late afternoon. I found sea spray a problem at both N'Gor and Calao resulting in the need for frequent cleaning of the lens. As pointed out above I would strongly recommend the use of a filter.

General observations on seabird movements

Without exception, all species included in the counts moved west along the coast. As would be expected, passage was heaviest during the first two hours after sunrise and the last two hours before sunset. Many birds passed very close offshore, pushed in no doubt by the strong onshore winds.

Species accounts

Cape Verde Petrel

Although the separation of the Atlantic *mollis* group of *Pterodroma* petrels in the field is not a straight forward matter there can be little doubt that the bird seen flying west at 12:30hrs on the 3rd was a Cape Verde Petrel. The bird passed at an estimated 500 mtrs offshore. No breast band or obvious 'face mask' were observed.

Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwater

Generally low numbers observed on the 2nd and 3rd but a heavy passage took place from mid afternoon on the 4th to the morning of the 7th. Many thousands of birds passed close inshore allowing the pale bill to be clearly observed. However despite substantial effort to scrutinize underwing patterns I could not determine which (sub) species were involved. As I understand it, the underwing pattern of both species varies and hybridization also occurs. Consequently, it is probably only safe to identify birds in the field based on extreme underwing patterns. Only one Scopoli's Shearwater was positively identified (see below). Many birds showed signs of moult varying from white patches to white bars on the upperwing. Finally, given that not all daylight hours were covered on the 6th, it is likely that in excess of 15,000 birds passed west during that day.

Scopoli's Shearwater

The only bird positively identified was seen on the afternoon of the 6th and showed a prominent white triangle extending well into the underwing primaries.

Cape Verde Shearwater

Only two seen, one on the afternoon of the 6th and one on the morning of the 7th. The smaller size and slimmer build was strikingly obvious after having watched thousands of Cory's pass over the last three days.

Sooty Shearwater

Moderate numbers seen with the largest day count of 747 on 6th occurring with the peak day count for Cory's.

Manx Shearwater

Only four individuals seen.

Wilson's Storm Petrel

A total of 23 individuals identified. Most birds were seen from late morning/early afternoon onwards. As would be expected most were seen from the Ile de N'Gor watch point.

Storm Petrel sp

Late afternoon on the 4th eight Storm Petrels were seen from Calao and were considered to be Wilson's but could not be unequivocally identified as such.

Red-billed Tropic Bird

Four adults and one nestling seen at nest sites with one/two adults seen in flight at Iles De La Madeleine on the 2nd.

Gannet

A total of five individuals seen and all juvenile birds.

Grey Phalarope

All sightings listed: two on the 4th; seven on the 5th; five on the 6th and five on the 7th. All were heading west.

Pomarine Skua

A steady passage during the six-day period peaking with 363 on 4th. The vast majority were adults/sub adults with only a handful of juveniles seen. Many still had full spoons and dark phase birds made up about 10% of birds seen. This species had a marked passage in the first hour after sunrise and the last hour and half before sunset.

Arctic Skua

Much less common than the above species with a peak of 86 on 6th. Again, adults/sub adults were vastly in the majority.

Long-tailed Skua

A total of 10 individuals seen of which one was an adult and nine were juveniles. Included a party of four juveniles on 3rd.

Great Skua

A *Catharacta* skua on the 2nd showed warm plumage tones, pale neck and dark cap consistent with Great Skua.

South Polar Skua

Two birds on the 4th and three on the 7th were seen close inshore and in good light making accurate judgment of bulk and plumage tones possible and were in my opinion juvenile/dark type South Polar Skuas. All showed cold plumage tones with no contrast between coverts and flight feathers on the upperwing and a jizz more reminiscent of (juv) Pomarine Skua in terms of bulk.

***Catharacta* Skua**

These birds were seen at greater distance or in less favorable light conditions and could not be unequivocally identified.

Sabine' Gull

Not noted daily and only in small numbers with the exception of 115 on the 4th. Adults certainly in the vast majority.

Audouin's Gull

Only a handful daily and all immatures.

Caspian Tern

Less than five individuals seen during the six-day period.

Royal Tern

Up to 50 seen foraging too and fro daily.

Lesser Crested Tern

One or two individuals picked out daily.

Sandwich Tern

Several hundred daily but no passage observed; all were birds foraging.

Commic/Roseate Tern

Surprisingly scarce up to the 5th with perhaps no more than 50 birds daily. A heavy westerly passage was observed during the 5th and 6th involving thousands of birds. Both Arctic and Common identified but no confirmed Roseates.

Black Tern

Singles on the 5th and 6th.

White-winged Black Tern

Non-breeding plumage adult on 5th.

Dave Thurlow

11.11.05

Notes

(1) Passage rates used to estimate day count for Cory's on the 7th:

0655 – 0740 – actual count of 1400

0740 – 0840 - passage of 75 birds per minute (sample counts of 51, 53, 90, 100, 57, 80 and 55 per minute)

0840 – 0900 – passage of 50 birds per minute (sample counts of 41 and 63 per minute)

0900 – 1000 – passage of 30 birds per minute (sample counts of 33, 31 and two at 32 per minute)

1000 – 1140 – passage of 20 birds per minute (sample counts of 20 and 33 per minute)

(2) Itinerary:

Wed 2nd: 0650 – 1050 : seawatch Calao;

1055 – 1555 : trip to Iles De La Madeleine;

1555 – 1850 : seawatch Calao.

Thu 3rd: seawatch Calao.

Fri 4th: 0655 – 0825 : seawatch Calao;

0910 – 1600 : seawatch Ile de N'Gor;

1650 – 1850 : seawatch Calao.

Sat 5th: 0655 – 0830 : seawatch Calao;

0905 – 1600 : seawatch Ile N'Gor;

1655 – 1825 : seawatch Calao,

Sun 6th: 0655 – 0850 : seawatch Calao;

0935 – 1600 : seawatch Ile N'Gor;

1630 – 1820 : seawatch Calao.

Mon 7th: 0655 – 1140 : seawatch Calao.

(3) A Humpback Whale was seen on the 6th.

Daily counts from the terrace of Calao and Ile N'Gor on 2-7th November 2005, by Dave Thurlow

Date	02.11.05		03.11.05		04.11.05		05.11.05		06.11.05		07.11.05	Total
Time	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	am	
	0650-1050	1555-1850	0625-0905	1400-1420	0655-0825	1400-1600	0655-0830	1340-1600	0655-0850	1350-1600	0655-1140	
			1000-1400	1450-1830	0910-1240	1650-1850	0905-1250	1655-1825	0935-1230	1630-1820		
Seawatch effort	4hrs	2hrs55min	6hrs40min	4hrs	5hrs	4hrs	5hrs20min	3hrs50min	4hrs50min	3hrs50min	4hrs45min	49hrs10min
Weather	N4, 0/8		N5, 0/8		N5, 5/8		N5, 1/8		N5, 2/8		N4, 1/8	
Cape Verde Petrel			1									1
Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwater	50	62	120	29	230	1327	1621	513	7240	5950	8900	26042
Scopoli's Shearwater										1		1
Cape Verde Shearwater										1	1	2
Sooty Shearwater	42	91	244	113	172	111	213	67	356	391	158	1958
Manx Shearwater	1	1				1					1	4
Wilson's Storm-petrel			3		3	1	1	6	3	5	1	23
Storm-petrel sp						8						8
Gannet					1		1	1		1	1	5
Pomarine Skua	56	36	186	42	88	275	174	105	141	79	94	1276
Arctic Skua	2	4	20	8	10	44	9	20	47	59	33	256
Long-tailed Skua		4				1			5			10
Great Skua	1											1
South Polar Skua						2					3	5
<i>Catharacta</i> Skua sp	4	2	1	1	2		1	1	3	1	1	17
Sabine's Gull		1	38	25		115	4	1	2	6		192