

BARC SUBMISSION

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* – Offshore Denmark, Western Australia, 31st December 2019

Machi Yoshida & Billy Thom

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*corresponding person:

Submission note: we believe this sighting constitutes the 2nd record of Cory's Shearwater for Australia (after a bird seen off Bremer Bay on the 19th January 2019).

Taxonomic notes: Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* is a relatively recent split from Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* as accepted by the IOC (version 9.2; following Robb & Mullarney 2008, Howell 2012, and Sangster et al. 2012) and the HBW-Birdlife list of birds (version 3.0). However, other taxonomies such as Clements (2019) still consider these two taxa as subspecies (*C. d. borealis* and *C. d. diomedea*, respectively). All three of these major taxonomies accept Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii* as a distinct species.

Circumstances of sighting: several sightings were made by Machi Yoshida and Billy Thom approximately 4 miles offshore from Denmark, Western Australia on the 31st December 2019. These were considered to represent up to 4 birds over an 800 m interval. Two single birds and two birds together with Flesh-footed Shearwaters. Machi managed to capture several photographs of at least one of these birds.

Description (from photos):

- A large shearwater with a thick, yellow bill, pale whitish underparts and dull beige to brown upperparts.
- The yellow bill is notably robust, bright yellow, and with a darker subterminal band.
- The upperparts are pale grey-brown with a contrast between the coffee/beige-coloured mantle, rump, uppertail, neck, and head and the darker brown wings and rectrices. The lower mantle, some scapulars and some uppertail coverts have paler tips giving a somewhat scaly appearance.
- The undertail coverts, belly, breast, flanks and throat are clean white, with just a beige wedge extending across the mid neck area.
- The underwings are mostly white with a thick dark trailing edge, very thin, irregular dark leading edge, a few scattered, darker secondary coverts and dark under primaries.
- The under primaries are mostly dark without any obvious white tongues 'bleeding' into the darker 'hand'. There is a whitish streak on the outermost primary, but this appears to be the white central shaft.
- There are darker spots at the base of the two outermost primaries (P9 and P10; need to look at two of the photos to see both of these spots).

Distinguishing similar species:

Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas* is smaller-headed and slimmer (less bulky) bird. It is readily distinguished from Cory's Shearwater by its pale, streaked head, paler, horn-coloured, narrower bill, scallier upperparts and dark underwing primary coverts.

Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii* is also quite easily eliminated by its finer, duller/darker bill, notably lacking the yellow colour and strongly contrasting dark subterminal band that are clearly

present on the photographed bird off Denmark, WA. Cape Verde Shearwater is also a notably slimmer species with narrower wings and a smaller head that may look 'capped'.

Distinguishing from the very similar Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*:

- Dark under primaries lacking significant white tongues intruding onto P5–P10 (some white on P10 in one image, but likely the white shaft). See Howell & Patteson, 2008 for a full discussion; also see Howell, 2012 and Fisher & Flood, 2010.
- Dark spots at the bases of both P10 and P9 (Scopoli's typically has a dark spot at only the base of P10). See Robb et al. 2008, Fisher & Flood, 2010 and Garner, 2012.
- Very large, thick yellow bill. Averages thicker and brighter than most Scopoli's Shearwaters.
- Structurally, this bird also looks thick-necked and bulky. Again, this favours Cory's Shearwater.
- The brownish wedge on the side of the neck is also considered more typical of Cory's Shearwater (see BBRC comments after Flood & Fisher, 2010).

Distribution of Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwater:

Cory's Shearwater is considered far more likely to occur off the southwest of Australia than Scopoli's Shearwater. They breed in the north Atlantic but winter as far south as South Africa and even regularly range into the western Indian Ocean (occurring as far north as Madagascar). This distribution into the Indian Ocean is supported by data logger information that also shows that Scopoli's Shearwaters do not enter the Indian Ocean (Robert Flood, pers comm). Scopoli's Shearwater breed in the Mediterranean and mostly winter off west Africa with smaller numbers ranging across to the waters east of Brazil. There are relatively few substantiated records of Scopoli's Shearwater from even as far south as South Africa, with tracking records showing the birds largely remain in the Canaries Current (mostly males) and Angola Current (mostly females).

Observer's experience:

Machi and Billy both work aboard the Naturaliste Charters whale watching boats. They both have extremely sharp eyesight and are experienced with the usual seabirds of the region, and thus are great at spotting anything that is different. Between them, they have a great track record of finding or co-finding rare birds off southern Western Australia; including several Great Shearwaters, Barau's Petrels, and a Chatham Albatross!!

References:

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Figure 1. Cory's Shearwater, 4 miles offshore Denmark, Western Australia, 31st December 2019 (Machi Yoshida). Note the dark under primaries without significant white tongues bleeding into the primaries. Dark spot visible on base of P9 and maybe also on P10 (but lost against leading edge of wing). Typically, there is a single dark spot at the base of P10 only for most Scopoli's Shearwaters.



Figure 2. Cory's Shearwater, 4 miles offshore Denmark, Western Australia, 31st December 2019 (Machi Yoshida). Again, note the dark primaries (the white streak on the outer primary is likely the flective light). The dark spot at the base of P10 is visible in this photo, with just a hint of the dark spot at the base of P9. Also note the very robust, bright yellow bill.



Figure 3. Cory's Shearwater, 4 miles offshore Denmark, Western Australia, 31st December 2019 (Machi Yoshida). Note the darker wings and tail that contrast with the overall beige/coffee coloured head, neck, mantle, and uppertail coverts.