BARC SUBMISSION

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

Perth Canyon, offshore Perth, WA

Submitted by: John Graff[1], Pieter van Dam, Steve Reynolds, Stewart Ford, and Dan Mantle

---

Summary

This submission relates to the sighting of a "black-and-white" shearwater in waters offshore from Perth near the head of the Perth Canyon on a single-day pelagic trip from Fremantle. Based on the clean black and white plumage, and head and underwing pattern, we consider the bird to be a Manx Shearwater. If accepted by BARC, this would represent the 3rd record for Australia and 1st record for waters off Western Australia.

SUBMISSION

Species: Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*)

Location: Continental shelf waters near the head of the Perth Canyon, c. 50 km offshore from Fremantle, WA

Date: Sunday 19th July 2020

Circumstances of sightings

The sighting was made on a regular single day pelagic trip to the waters at the head of the Perth Canyon, the second of a double-header weekend of trips. The week leading up to the trip had seen a strong westerly flow across the Indian Ocean, and we were hopeful this would result in an interesting weekend of trips.

After drifting for almost two hours in waters over a sharp drop-off at the head of the Perth Canyon, a small shearwater was seen passing the starboard side, heading towards the back of the boat – SF was viewing from the upper deck and suggested it may have flushed off the water. After heading towards the back of the boat, it changed direction and flew back in the direction it had come, making a close pass of the starboard side of the boat. During this closer pass it was picked up by JG and others on the lower deck, and the relatively clean white underwings and throat, and overall clean black and white appearance immediately drew attention. The call was quickly made for people to "get on this shearwater!", but it continued away from the boat, so was missed by several people and most only had brief views. Fortunately, PvD and SR both obtained photos of the bird that we consider are sufficient to confirm its identity as a Manx Shearwater, which would represent the third confirmed record for Australia and the first for waters off Western Australia if accepted.

Physical description

See also images provided with submission.

Small to medium shearwater with predominantly blackish upperparts and whitish underparts, giving a relatively clean black and white appearance.

Underparts mostly white, with black tail (but whitish undertail coverts), moderately broad blackish trailing edge to underwing, narrow blackish leading edge to underwing, and narrow

diagonal axillary bar across inner underwing. See also Figs. 1 & 3. The axillary bar is at the darker end of the spectrum for the axillary bar – about 5-10% of Manx Shearwaters show this feature (Gil-Velasco *et al*. 2015; Flood & Fisher 2020), though it is worth noting that the Manx Shearwater recorded off Tasmania in August 2019 (BARC Case No. 1084) shared this feature. It is typical for juveniles to have more of these dark feathers (Flood & Fisher 2020: Niall Keogh, pers. obs.) and this may further support the idea that these birds represent wandering over-summering 1st or 2nd year birds, which is suggested by the timing of these records. Note that the tiny Canaries Islands population also shows darker axillary bars compared to the average North Atlantic Manx Shearwater, but that population is so small that it seems unlikely to be the source for these recent Australian sightings.

Upperparts fairly uniform blackish, with somewhat weak white "saddlebags" extending up from the flanks behind the wings. See also Figs. 2 & 4.

Head blackish extending below the eye then grading to whitish throat, with clear whitish auricular crescent extending up behind ear coverts, weak blackish half collar.

Size and shape overall impression of size was similar to a Hutton's Shearwater, though SF felt it appeared slightly larger than a typical Hutton's.

Elimination of confusion species

The general size, shape and broad plumage pattern of this bird identify it as one of the small to medium "black-and-white" shearwaters, ruling out other tubenose groups.

Hutton's Shearwater (*Puffinus huttoni*) is the most commonly seen "black-and-white" shearwater in these waters but was ruled out by a combination of mostly clean white underwings, noticeable white "saddlebags", and the clear whitish crescent behind the eye.

Little Shearwater (*Puffinus assimilis*) is the other typical "black-and-white" shearwater in waters off Perth. It can be ruled out by the longer and more pointed wings, longer bill, and the dark bar on the inner underwing. Little Shearwater would also be expected to show more white around the face, though this can be much reduced in some individuals of the local subspecies.

Subantarctic (Little) Shearwater (*Puffinus* [*assimilis*] *elegans*) shows less white in the face than Little and can show a head pattern quite reminiscent of the subject bird. However, the other features listed above that rule out Little Shearwater also rule out Subantarctic Shearwater.

Fluttering Shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*) is probably the confusion species closest to this bird in terms of plumage and shape. Fluttering Shearwater would be expected to show more brown-toned upperparts and a less prominent auricular crescent. Also of importance is the underwing pattern, which is subtly different to Fluttering with the dark axillary bar narrower and more neatly defined, and widening at either end, rather than less clearly defined and broadening towards the rear of the underwing as in Fluttering Shearwater.

Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) is very similar to Manx Shearwater, but is unlikely to occur in Australian waters as it is largely sedentary around the Mediterranean, and is relatively rare even in the north Atlantic Ocean. In addition, the axillary bar on Yelkouan would be expected to thicken more towards the trailing edge than on this bird. Most Yelkouan also have duskier flanks and at least some duskier undertail coverts (absent on this bird), tend to be browner above and thus less present a less "black-and-white" overall appearance, and typically show a less distinct auricular crescent than this bird.

Balearic Shearwater (*Puffinus mauretanicus*) can also approach with Manx Shearwater in appearance, but is bulkier, browner, and even the very palest birds are unlikely to be as cleanly "black-and-white" as this bird. Similarly, even the palest Balearic Shears have some dusky undertail coverts (also extending to lower belly on most birds) and also lack the well-defined auricular crescent shown by this bird.

Habitat: Pelagic waters over continental shelf near the head of deep undersea canyon.

Previous occurrence: There are no previous records of Manx Shearwater from the Perth Canyon, or elsewhere in waters off Western Australia. There are two previous records for Australia; a dead bird beachwashed at Venus Bay in South Australia in November 1961 (BARC Case No. 712) and a bird seen at sea off Eaglehawk Neck in Tasmania on 11th August 2019 (BARC Case No. 1084). Most Manx Shearwaters would be expected to be breeding in the northern hemisphere at this time of year, but we note regular sightings off South Africa through the southern winter, so some young birds or other non-breeders do appear to remain in the

southern hemisphere for the southern winter. There had also been a strong westerly winds across the Indian Ocean for the week preceding the observation.

References

Flood B. & Fisher A. (2020) *Multimedia Identification Guide to North Atlantic Seabirds: Shearwaters, Jouanin's and White-chinned Petrels*. Pelagic Birds & Birding Multimedia Identification Guides, United Kingdom.

Gil-Verlasco M., Rodriguez G., Arcos J. A. & Menzie (2015) Plumage variability and field identification of Manx, Yelkouan and Balearic Shearwaters. *British Birds* **108**(9).

Bibliography

Howell S. N. G & Zufelt K. (2019) *Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photographic Guide*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Menkhorst P., Rogers D., Clarke R., Davies J., Marsack P. & Franklin K. (2019) *The Australian Bird Guide* Revised Edition. CSIRO Publishing, Victoria.

Acknowledgements

We would to acknowledge the Jazz Charters crew for getting us out to the canyon for these trips!

Images

The photographers, Pieter van Dam and Steve Reynolds, consent to BARC displaying the images provided with this submission with acknowledgement.

Figure 1 – Underpart shots. Photos Pieter van Dam.

Figure 2 – Upperparts. Photo Pieter van Dam.

Figure 3 – Upperparts. Photo Steve Reynolds.

Figure 4 – Underparts. Photo Steve Reynolds.