

A SECOND WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER IN CALIFORNIA

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On 31 July 1988 we started a day of birding at the mouth of the Whitewater River at the north end of the Salton Sea, Riverside County. At about 0630 we waded across the rivermouth to check the area to the west of the river. When partially across the river we stopped on an exposed sandbar and looked over the open water to the south. Almost immediately Webster spotted a procellariiform flying toward us from the southwest and pointed it out to McCaskie. As we watched the bird flying toward us we initially considered the Flesh-footed Shearwater (*Puffinus carneipes*) since the uniform dark coloration of the bird, along with its slow manner of flight, closely matched that species. However, as the bird got closer it became clear that the bill was dark, eliminating the possibility of a Flesh-footed Shearwater. In addition, our brief views of the tail left us both with the impression that the bird had an unusually long tail for a shearwater, leading Webster to suggest it might be a Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*). The bird continued to fly toward us, giving us time to consider the Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) and eliminate that species as a possibility. When about 100 yards to the southwest of us it landed on the water among a small group of gulls, giving us an ideal opportunity to study it carefully while commenting on the shape and coloration of the bill, the coloration of the head and breast, the apparent patterning on the upperparts, the protrusion of the tip of the tail beyond the tips of the folded wings, and the coloration on the underwings on the one occasion it flapped its wings while swimming.

At this point we were convinced the bird was a dark-morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater. Webster went back to the car for his camera while McCaskie kept an eye on the bird. During Webster's absence the bird did much bathing and preening. At one point while the shearwater was preening its tail, it raised its tail upward and partially spread it, clearly showing it to be pointed at the tip. The central tail feathers were noticeably longer than the outer tail feathers, giving the tail a shape similar to that of a booby's.

Just as Webster was returning the shearwater jumped into flight, allowing McCaskie to see the feet and legs. Initially the bird flew off toward the southwest, then turned to the north and swung back toward us. The bird followed the shoreline, heading directly toward us from the west, passing within 100 feet of us, and continued along the shoreline to east of the rivermouth. Then it turned south and flew out over the open water of the Salton Sea, disappearing from sight. We had the bird under observation for between 20 and 30 minutes. While the shearwater was flying toward and past us, Webster took nine photographs, one of which has been published (*American Birds* 42:1225, 1988). Together the photographs clearly show the bird to be a large dark shearwater with a long tail and wings held flexed at the wrists. One of the photographs shows the bill to be a grayish with a dark tip. Webster immediately departed to spread the word of our discovery. Birders were at the mouth of the Whitewater River from about 1030 to dark on 31 July, and again during the first half of the morning on 1 August, but without seeing the shearwater.

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater was a uniform brown, noticeably paler than a Flesh-footed Shearwater, with the dark eye being a noticeable feature of the face, and the color of the underwings most like that on the underwings of the darker Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). When the bird was sitting on the water we were able to see that the back and scapular feathers were fringed with lighter brown, creating a scaled pattern. This feature was not prominent, however, and not evident when we were observing the bird in flight. The tip of the tail protruded an inch or so

beyond the tips of the primaries on the folded wings. The bill was long and narrow like that of other shearwaters, being a dark blue-gray with a blackish tip. The feet and legs were entirely pink.

In flight the Wedge-tailed Shearwater had the long-winged profile of a Buller's Shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*) but an even longer tail. The bird flew with slow wing-beats and much gliding, the wings held bowed downward but with a kink at the carpal joint like that on a frigatebird. The feathers on the wings, especially the secondaries, appeared worn. A study of the photographs shows the bird was molting primaries.

A light-morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater photographed about 4 miles off Point Pinos, Monterey County, California, on 31 August 1986 (Stallcup et al. 1988) represents the only previous recorded occurrence of this species in North America. The Wedge-tailed Shearwater inhabits the warm waters of the Pacific and Indian oceans, its closest approach to California being along the west coast of Mexico. King (1974) showed Wedge-tailed Shearwaters occurring off western Mexico north to near the southern tip of Baja California. In addition, King found relatively large numbers of dark-morph Wedge-tailed Shearwaters off western Mexico in July. Pitman (1986) also showed Wedge-tailed Shearwaters ranging as far north as off the coast of Nayarit, near the mouth of the Gulf of California.

This is not the first time a procellariiform has reached the Salton Sea, there being previous recorded occurrences of the Laysan Albatross (*Diomedea immutabilis*), Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*), Buller's Shearwater, Sooty Shearwater, Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*), Black Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma melania*), and Least Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma microsoma*). The appearance of the Least Storm-Petrels and one of the Leach's Storm-Petrels was associated with Hurricane Kathleen's passage through the area on 10 September 1976. However, all other occurrences of procellariiforms appear unrelated to storms, the birds being found during calm conditions and suspected of reaching the area by way of the Gulf of California. We suspect the Wedge-tailed Shearwater seen at the north end of the Salton Sea on 31 July 1988 also reached this area by way of the Gulf of California, by entering the Gulf from the waters off Nayarit, moving north to the head of the Gulf, and across the 200 miles of flat land separating the Salton Sea from the Gulf.

This record (150-1988) was reviewed by the California Bird Records Committee and received a unanimous endorsement. The record, including the nine photographs taken by Webster, is now on file at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Los Angeles.

LITERATURE CITED

- King, W. B. 1974. Wedge-tailed Shearwater, in Pelagic studies of seabirds in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean. Smithsonian Contr. Zool. 158.
- Pitman, R. L. 1986. Atlas of Seabird Distribution and Relative Abundance in the Eastern Tropical Pacific. Southwest Fisheries Center Administrative Report LJ-86-02C. Southwest Fisheries Center, P. O. Box 271, La Jolla, CA 92038.
- Stallcup, R., Morlan J., and Roberson, D. 1988. First record of the Wedge-tailed Shearwater in California. W. Birds 19:61-68.

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Wedge-tailed Shearwater off Woolongong, N.S.W. Australia, November 1986

Photo by Bruce Webb