



Image courtesy Natalie Bool

Short-Tailed Shearwater – *Ardenna tenuirostris* (formerly *Puffinus tenuirostris*)

Description

The Short-Tailed Shearwater is commonly known in Tasmania as the muttonbird, or *Yolla* to people of Aboriginal heritage. One of three species of shearwater in Tasmania these birds undertake amazing migrations during the non-breeding season from the Southern Ocean to the North Pacific, Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait. During the breeding season they fly as far south as the Antarctic Continental Shelf. They are dark sooty brown in colour with an average lifespan of 30 years. Adult birds weigh approximately 500 grams and have a wing span of about 1 metre. They can dive up to 50m underwater chasing prey, using their wings to propel and guide them.

The Short-Tailed Shearwater is one of few Australian native birds that is commercially harvested. During the 'muttonbird' season (March 27 – April 30), chicks are taken for their feathers, flesh and oil, forming an important part of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

History

First described by Dutch ornithologist *Jacob Temminck* in 1835, he named it *Puffinus tenuirostris* (*tenui* = slender, *rostrum* = bill). The shearwater was also recorded much earlier by members of Captain Cook's Third Expedition in 1778 and also by Matthew Flinders in 1798 (see below).

Distribution

Approximately 23 million Short-Tailed Shearwaters breed in about 285 colonies around Tasmania, on islands in Bass Strait and in southern Australia from September to April. 18 million of these arrive in Tasmania each year. There are 209 known colonies in Tasmania containing an estimated 11.4 million burrows. Their colonies are usually found on promontories, headlands and islands covered with tussocks and succulent vegetation where exposed areas allow for easy take-off and landing.

Early accounts suggest that the population was once considerably higher. In 1798, Matthew Flinders estimated at least 100 million birds within a single flock sighted in Bass Strait. Recent studies suggest the majority of birds fly north along the western part of the Pacific Ocean to the Arctic region and return southwards through the centre of the ocean. Advances in technology leading to the recent application of geolocators has uncovered that prior to commencing their post breeding northern migration, they initially fly south of the Antarctic Polar Front to highly productive cold water upwellings to feed for several weeks. Short-Tailed Shearwaters travel about 15 – 17 thousand kilometres in each direction annually. They have been known to fly this remarkable distance in three weeks with movement across the Pacific Ocean Basin being particularly rapid, travelling 11, 000 km in 13 days, a rate of 840km per day.

Breeding

Breeding pairs dig nesting burrows in September/early October, laying a single egg in November. Chicks hatch in late January and are fed by both parents until the adults leave in early April. Two to three weeks later the chicks lose their down, grow flight feathers and begin their own migration unaccompanied by adult birds.

Food

Shearwaters feed on krill, squid and fish. Their main methods of feeding are plunging into the water, pursuing underwater, surface seizing, scavenging and hydroplaning. They are capable swimmers and are able to dive to 50 meters. Their hooked bill allows them to hold on to their prey. During the breeding season the adults alternate between short local foraging trips to provision the chick and long-trips to the Antarctic region to maintain the adults' body condition. The adults provide large amounts of oil from their stomach which is high in energy content and sustains the chicks while the parents are away. During migration they feed whenever food is available.

It is possible that meso-pelagic (inhabiting the intermediate depths of the sea, between about 200 and 1,000 metres down) fish and krill abundance determines the migration of the species, allowing them to exploit the high concentrations of krill that occur each summer at both polar regions.

Useful References;

Tasmanian Wildlife Matters

http://www.wildlifematters.org.au/ST_Shearwater.htm

Australian Antarctic Division

<http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/wildlife/animals/flying-birds/petrels-and-shearwaters/short-tailed-shearwater>

Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/?base=5100>