

PORT FAIRY BOAT TRIP TO THE CONTINENTAL SHELF

HFNC excursion 18 March 2001

Rod Bird

After abortive efforts in 2000 to make a trip, we finally managed a start on the “Michael J”. This boat can take up to 13 passengers and is used by Birds Australia with noted bird observer Mike Carter and others. However, it was touch and go whether we started, on account of windy weather – the pilot drove around to the south beach to have a look at the surf and suggested that we would be in for quite a rough day! We decided to continue and he was not wrong. Oddly, those who declared that they were used to boats and would not get sea-sick did so, whilst those who were less certain did not. One thing is certain, the only way to overcome the worst is to stay out in the fresh air and keep looking at the horizon. Going down to the cabin is the worst option. Reading or fiddling with cameras (or the like) is also a recipe for disaster. Apparently eating oranges should also be avoided. Taking a beta-blocker 30 minutes before starting is helpful but can make one quite sleepy.

Diane and I had a great trip with Mike Carter and Co. in April 1999, when the sea was calm and the surface like glass near the coast. We were lucky then to see a Pygmy Blue Whale at close quarters – it surfaced 10 m astern when we stopped to look at phosphorescent plankton in the water a few km from shore. The whale was skimming plankton from the water. Apparently there are upwellings of cold water from the Antarctic along the coast and that provides a good source of nutrient for plankton (tiny shrimp-like creatures) and the schools of fish that feed upon them. I should add that this “pygmy” must have been nearly 20 m long.

On the outward journey we went via Deen Maar (Lady Julia Percy Is.). We travelled along the long western section and stopped for a while in the Seal Bay to watch the seals. The chop was so bad there that all those that had not been sick were either sick there or looked very seedy, imploring the pilot to get going again! That we did with alacrity and the fresh air and forward progress soon revived us. We had quite good views of seals of various ages and sizes in the little rocky bay and on the ledges. This is the site where a boat can approach close to the shore and it appears that access to the top of the island is gained up a trail through the rocks (the seals were doing that).

We saw 4 Albatross species, including the Wandering and other species listed below. The method used to view the birds is for the boat to stop when near the edge of the shelf and the operator throws out bits of offal to attract the birds. The albatrosses alight in the water alongside the boat and a grand squabble ensues as they fight for the scraps. Meanwhile, Great-winged Petrels, Shearwaters and others dart in and out.

The edge is indicated by the sonar depth screen in the cabin, where one can see the sudden plunge beneath. It is also the place where fishing trawlers operate and sea birds follow those boats to get the discarded catch.

GI = Griffith Is, JP = Deen Maar

	Species	Site
1	Ruddy turnstone	*GI
2	Black-faced cormorant	*GI
3	Pied cormorant	*GI
4	Little pied cormorant	*GI
5	Kelp gull	*JP
6	Pacific gull	*GI
7	Silver gull	*
8	Crested tern	*
9	Australian gannet	*
10	Arctic jaeger	*
11	Great-winged petrel	*
12	White-chinned petrel	*
13	Wilson's storm-petrel	*
14	White-faced storm-petrel	*
15	Fairy prion	*
16	Short-tailed shearwater	*
17	Flesh-footed shearwater	*
18	Fluttering shearwater	*
19	Black-browed albatross	*
20	Yellow-nosed albatross	*1
21	Shy albatross	*
22	Wandering albatross	*1J,5S

The run home was a windy affair, with spray whipping up and into the space where we sat or stood. We all had wet weather gear (coats and caps at least and some wore rubber boots) and this was not of much consequence, but it does take a 2-3 hours to cover the 50-odd km back to base.