



The Wedge-tailed Shearwater

Ardenna pacifica

A coastal and pelagic species found in tropical and sub-tropical waters covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans (and probably in former times the central Atlantic). Occurs from the islands to the north and east of Madagascar where many breeding colonies occur and ranging at sea to as far as the Arabian Sea, India and eastwards to Australia with further breeding colonies at the Chagos archipelago, the Cocos Keeling Group and several islands off north western and western Australia south to as far as Fremantle. Very widespread in the central Pacific with numerous breeding colonies occurring on oceanic islands from the Great Barrier Reef to as far south as Montagu Island in Eastern Australia. Also found breeding on many equatorial islands north to Japan, Hawaii and east across to central America to Revillagigedo off Baja California, Mexico. Generally populations are sedentary but at the northern and southern extremities of their distribution they are to some extent migratory.

One of the large all dark shearwaters (though some are pale bellied). Diagnostic features when on the wing are a buoyant, unhurried flight with wing 'shoulders' held well forward and a slow flap-flap glide flight. Slim and long in the body with the large tail usually held closed except when banking sharply. Diagnostic features of chicks from other likely similar species when in the hand are white toe nails. The call is diagnostic and best described as a 'slow, mournful wail' – rising and falling in pitch which can be heard at night coming from burrows on the breeding colonies.

The breeding routine is much as that for other similar large shearwaters such as the Short-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna tenuirostris*. On Montagu Island birds return in mid-August to early September when they establish pair bonds, dig out, prepare and defend potential nesting burrows. Breeding birds then depart on a pre-laying exodus as do most shearwaters. Birds return to the Island after an absence of approximately 3 weeks. On Montagu Island laying dates seem not to be quite as tight as those observed for Short-tailed Shearwater being spread over a couple of weeks but still with a concentration late in November. The incubation routine is similar to that found in Short-tailed Shearwaters but provisioning of chick occurs at relatively short intervals of between 2 and 5 days and without long foraging trips by adults. Adults visit the island less frequently from early April onwards and the chicks usually depart by May.

To date there have been few studies on the birds local movements at Montagu Island so it is not clear where they feed. However, provisioning trips are rarely very long and most food must therefore be collected from relatively short distances from



the island. Their diet is mainly small fish and cephalopods (squid) that live in warmer waters, unlike the Short-tailed Shearwater which prefers prey from cooler waters. Most items are taken from on or near the surface and diving deeply below the surface is unusual.

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THE WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER

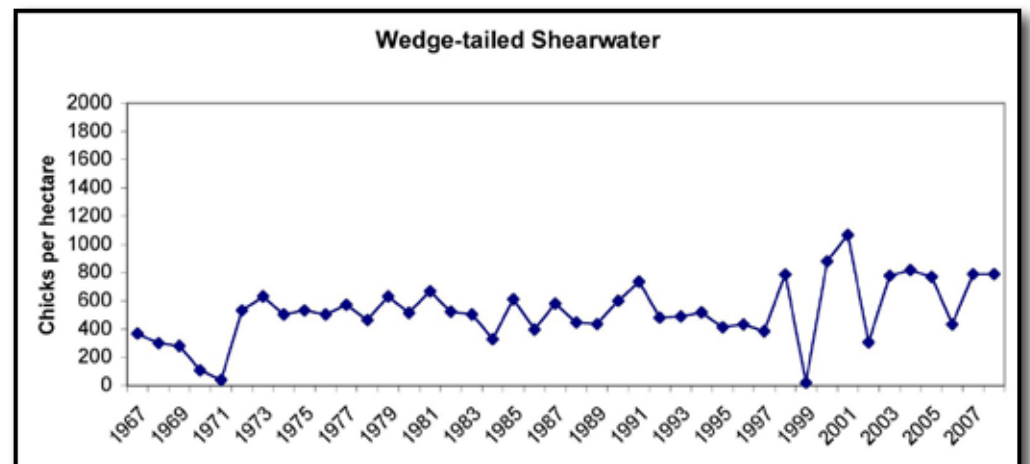
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Any increase in the frequency of warm currents around the Island may well have a significant effect on the local demography of this species.

The monogamous pair bond is long term and possibly life-long with birds living for up to 30 years. Breeding can first occur at age four. The annual breeding success of this species has been followed on Montagu Island for the past 49 years with an estimation of occupancy rates within specific survey plots on both North and South Island.



Numbers of chicks/ha produced from three study areas on Montagu Island 1967-2008. Counts from 1960-66 have been excluded because during those years the study methods were under development. Methods became strictly standardized from 1967 onwards.

Further reading

Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Vol 1, part A. Eds S. Marchant and P.J. Higgins (1990). Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Albatrosses and Petrels across the World. Michael Brooke (2004). Oxford University Press, Oxford.

The Petrels: Their Ecology and Breeding Systems. John Warham (1990) Academic Press, London.

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