

Raine Island QLD Seabird Expedition.

In search of Herald Petrel

In September 2015 I ran three back-to-back pelagic trips to Raine Island, which is situated on the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef about 130km due east of Cape York's Jardine NP and about 130km north of Portland Roads (Lockhart River).

Raine Island is the site of Australia's only breeding colony of Herald Petrel and with only ten pairs, these are Australia's rarest breeding seabirds (tubenoses). This was the first organised pelagic trip to the Island by birders since 1995 and all three trips were successful in finding the bird.

We used the boat Eclipse FNQ, which was a very stable and comfortable motorised catamaran, starting and finishing each trip at Lockhart River. Most guests on board spent time before and after the trip in and around Iron Range NP, whilst staying at the Iron Range Cabins at the Lockhart River Airport.



Trip 1: We departed Portland Roads on the 10 September 2015 in very windy conditions forcing us to travel north inside the reef. Our second night was spent at Great Detached Reef with Raine Island tantalisingly visible in the distance about 5nm north and where one of our group had a brief sighting of a Herald Petrel flying home, north along the reef, late in the afternoon. We spent the next two days in a 2-3m swell mostly keeping in the lee of the island, taking cover from the wind and swell. We still hadn't seen our target bird by our final afternoon and decided to make one last run out into the Coral Sea east of Raine. After two hours in deep water and 4nm south-east of the island an impressive Herald Petrel flew in towards the boat. Everyone was perfectly positioned to see the bird glide to within 50m of the back of the boat to a very relieved and happy group of sea birders.

Other species seen were Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Wilson's Storm Petrel, Red-tailed Tropicbird, Black-naped Tern, Lesser & Greater Frigatebird, Masked, Brown & Red-footed Booby, as well as hundreds of Black and Brown Noddy.



Trip 2: We headed north from Portland Roads into a rapidly decreasing swell and much improved sea birding conditions, commensurate with what one would expect from the Great Barrier Reef. At 10.45am on the first morning we saw our first Herald Petrel as we cruised through the Black Rock Entrance at Wreck Bay, just north of Mantis Reef. After travelling north in deep water during the day we had our second sighting at 3.15pm in 450m water depth, about 5nm south east of Raine and 127km north of Portland Roads.

Our third sighting came at 6.20am the following morning whilst at anchor behind Great Detached Reef. A lone Herald Petrel flew in towards the back of the boat from shallow water inside the reef. This was followed by a further two sightings that morning both in about 400m of water. Our final two sightings came after lunch on the 16 September in 800m of water about 7nm off Raine Island.

Interestingly, all sightings involved inquisitive birds that flew in towards the boat, with a few individuals coming to within 20m, before crossing the wake a couple of times then quickly departing. In addition to the first trip we saw three dark phase Kermadec Petrels and several Black-bellied Storm Petrels.



Trip 3: We departed Portland Roads on the 18 September 2015 into perfect weather and sea conditions. We made our way directly to the outer reef and spent the entire day travelling north between 500m and 2000m water depth. There was not a breath of wind and the ocean was calm as far as the eye could see. Great for boating but unfortunately not great for sea birding as most of the birds we encountered were sitting on the water. We even had a raft of 16 Wilson's Storm Petrels sitting on the water.

From the top deck we scanned the horizon all day with not a petrel in sight. At 3.20pm in 600m of water we came across our first and only Herald Petrel of the trip and it too was sitting on the water. As we made a close pass, it alighted and like all the other birds we'd seen, came into the back of the boat for a closer look. Cameras were fired off and it too eventually peeled off towards the horizon. Despite another two days of searching we failed to see another petrel in the doldrum like conditions.

We travelled home inside the reef in search of other species and soon came across a feeding flock of 500 Black Noddy and 100 Black-naped Tern working a school of bait fish. We all stood on the bow and slowly inched our way closer to the feeding frenzy, spending the next half an hour watching and photographing. As we continued south we had lunch near Sunday Island and most of the group decided to spend a couple of hours in search of Ashy-bellied (Pale) White-eye. After a short search we had excellent views of several birds as well as the added bonus of Mangrove Robin, Collared Kingfisher, Mangrove Golden Whistler and Rose-crowned Fruit Dove. We disembarked the following morning, with most of the group spending a further couple of days of relaxed birding in Iron Range National Park.

In total we had ten separate sightings of our target species Herald Petrel, with most of those sightings being within 7nm of Raine Island, in between 400m-800m of water and to the south east of the island.

I'm considering running another trip to Raine Island at the same time of year either in 2016 or 2017. If you're interested coming along, please let me know.

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