

The Ambassador Abroad... Around the World in 152 Days (Part 3)

Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch is sailing around the world as onboard naturalist and guest speaker on Viking Neptune. Here he continues his account as the World Cruise gets underway from Los Angeles.

World Cruise Sector 1 (LA – Auckland)

The Viking world cruise books up very quickly and so unlike some, it is not usually sold in sectors. Once you join in LA, you're on for the duration and there is no space onboard for people to sign up along the way. This means a completely unique community builds up from early in the voyage and it is a great pleasure and privilege to be a part of this amazing experience.

The First Sea Days, The First Sightings

Our original schedule would have seen us in Santa Barbara on the first day but a major storm was ravaging the area and it was decided that we would head directly to Hawaii instead, following a slightly more southerly course than normal.

Every sea day, I lead a Wildlife Watch from the Explorer's Lounge or the outside deck in front. This is usually 10am and 12noon but occasionally 2pm to 4pm depending on my other duties. I am often around at other times too but rarely as early as 7am, which is a shame as that was when the first sightings began!

Early on 9th January, at 0705 to be precise, guests reported seeing a large whale with a smaller one beside, blowing 3 or 4 times to starboard. They were probably sperm whales from the description. Then at 0715, dolphins, possibly common, were reported leaping to port and then aft and then at 0735, 3 or more were seen again to port. A whale, with a low bushy blow was also reported at lunchtime.

On the next day we caught glimpses of what were probably black-footed albatross and then at 1422 we witnessed 4 huge blows over a 5 minute period, perhaps 2 miles to port which could have only been blue or perhaps fin whales.



We were also accompanied by brown (above) and red-footed boobies hunting the occasional flying fish.

Day 3 brought more flying fish and a white-morph red-footed booby flying with us to hunt them. Black-footed albatross were also seen again and a guest reported a large whale close to the starboard bow, blowing but mostly submerged. Probably once again a sperm whale.

More black-footed albatross were spotted on 12th



January and as my watch finished, 2 or 3 large whales, which I was fairly sure were sperm whales, were seen blowing 2 or more miles off the port bow and then to port. It was breezy but the blows looked to be angular at the instant of exhalation and my photographs later confirmed the ID. Two more were seen to starboard by guests at around 1300. At 1315 we were joined by a masked booby for a while and then at 1323, whilst relaxing on a sofa at the stern, we were able to photograph a sperm whale on the surface and then blowing just to port of the wake.



More blows were seen by guests at around 1630.

January 13th was our 5th sea day and by now, a number of guests were well tuned in to watching for the wildlife. Notable amongst these is Roger Strom who we have sailed with a few times before and is an early riser and keen photographer. A new friend is Daryl Golinsky, an even earlier riser, who has also become an invaluable source of sightings and photography. They began today's record with a yellow-billed tropicbird at 0740.

At c.0815, two low blows were seen around 2 miles to port and then two more between 0915 and 0920 away to starboard. These were both more than likely sperm whales but this cannot be confirmed. At 0917, a frigatebird appeared alongside the World Café, having just caught a large flying fish which it was struggling to turn around and swallow.

This became a great day for birdwatchers as throughout the day we were regularly joined by both adult and immature red-footed boobies riding the



updrafts around the ship and chasing flying fish. Shearwaters, probably wedge-tailed, also made a brief appearance as well as a pair of band-rumped storm-petrels.

At 1610 a Nazca booby made an appearance, far from its home on the Mexican coast, barely half an hour after another whale was seen blowing a mile to starboard. Shortly after, a male great frigatebird also joined us to soar with us and hunt the flying fish.

The day ended with two of "our" red-footed boobies settling down to roost on the foremast

Hawaii

January 14th was another sea day which saw us sailing around The Big Island. This is a volcanically active location and we could see clear evidence of this during our circumnavigation.

Earlier in the day, at 0645, Daryl reported at least one whale blowing far away to port with tall straight blows, and Roger saw a red-footed booby at 0715 and a large school of tuna or something similar splashing at 0755. We watched a black-footed albatross make a laboured take-off at 1155 and then at 1255 another guest, Charlie, reported a pod of 25-30 dolphins 200 metres to port which he had seen whilst walking laps down on Deck 2. Another large pod was reported at 1325, also to port.

As darkness approached fellow lecturer Richard Steckel and I watched a large flock of big dark coloured birds flying along the coast but we were unable to identify them

The next morning saw us in Honolulu where we were to stay two days as our planned visit to Kauai was cancelled due to a shortage of tour buses! Around the harbour white terns, often erroneously called fairy terns, constantly dipped for fish but otherwise it was only a few land birds that piqued our interest including a black-crowned night heron in the Hilton Hawaiian village and Laysan finches, common waxbills, Pacific golden plovers and zebra doves around Pearl Harbour.

When we sailed on 16th January, two or perhaps three humpbacks were seen at 1745, fine on the port bow not far out from the harbour.



Two were close together and seen fairly clearly by the guests on the deck with us but they were never near the ship and light was fading so the photography was not great! Nonetheless, it was great to see them and some guests had taken whale watching cruises earlier and also seen up to three whales just off Waikiki Beach close to where these dived.

Across the Pacific to French Polynesia

These voyages really give one a sense of just how vast the Pacific really is. It took us 6 days to reach Hawaii

and it would be another 5 before we reached Bora Bora! How different it must have been for those earlier explorers with their salt pork and hard tack biscuits in their tiny sailing vessels. As I stand on watch, I often think about them, and those who later stood on a similar watch in these waters in far less comfort. Instead of hoping to see a cetacean they were hoping *not* to see a periscope or the tell-tale track of a torpedo.

January 17th saw more shearwaters and a single black-footed albatross cross close over the bow. Guests reported 12+ “fairly small” dolphins leaping to starboard at 1710.

Day 2 brought more dolphins beginning at 1105 with 10+ jumping high and coming from starboard to the bow during my watch with Roger seeing another 3 on the port side. It was so quick that neither of us could get a photograph or confirm species! Throughout the morning and early afternoon, mainly immature masked (below) and red-footed boobies fed alongside



and in the wake, riding our updraft. A white tern also joined us briefly.

Unfortunately the following 2 days were somewhat compromised by my completely losing my voice and being ordered by the doctor to rest for two days. These were also quite windy days but we frequently had two or three masked boobies with us, as well as occasional sooty terns and shearwaters, probably wedge-tailed, and a frigatebird early on 21st. Flying fish of course were also pretty much ever present. At around 1600 on 21st, as we “passed” Flint Island 52 miles away to port, we witnessed a feeding frenzy of boobies, shearwaters and terns

Bora Bora, Moorea and Tahiti

During the sail-in to Bora Bora on 22nd we were accompanied by up to 5 red-footed boobies and many flying fish, some of which were snatched from the air

by the birds just before they returned to their watery home or in some cases, just after! We also saw a few white terns.

Moorea provided a more diverse range of wildlife including a few shearwaters and brown noddies



(above) as well as more red-footed boobies and white terns. As we came through the reef we were briefly greeted by 3 or 4 spinner dolphins but no-one managed photographs! During the day, many more brown noddies could be seen hunting from their perches on channel markers, accompanied by great crested terns. We also saw a green sea turtle during our lagoon boat trip.

Tahiti proved quiet for wildlife this time, although there were great crested, and white, terns around the harbour and we had a glimpse of a spinner dolphin leaping into the port bow as we sailed away in the dark.

On to Auckland

The plan when we sailed was to head to the Bay of Islands in the north of New Zealand where a resident group of bottlenose can be found. I have previously pointed out to a researcher on a tourist boat that they are not actually, *the* biggest bottlenose in the world as our UK dolphins have that honour but they are certainly amongst the largest. Sadly they are also a declining population and it is to be hoped that the additional protections recently put in place will help them recover. Key amongst these is a ban on swimming with groups including calves and stronger guidance for boat owners and operators.

Early sightings on 25th included a white tern and immature red-footed booby as well as a dark coloured, probably sooty, shearwater. At 1026, a yellow-billed tropicbird flew across just ahead of the bow. Flying fish regularly fled what they saw as the predatory intent of the ship!

It was not until 1846 that we saw anything else when 2 sperm whales could be seen ½ mile to port, logging and displaying their distinctive angled blow (below)



and a brown booby flew down the port side a few minutes later. We discovered later that guests had also seen two sperm whales during their dinner ten minutes earlier and on the starboard side. Intriguingly, another guest reported seeing large splashes at 1703 which reminded him of humpbacks breaching. This would be unlikely at this time of year but a sperm whale would be a distinct possibility.

The next sea day brought only birds and a lot of swell and white water. Many more wedge-tailed shearwaters were gliding over the waves, up to 5 at a time being near us, and we had glimpses of white birds including white terns and possibly tropicbirds. There were also small groups of petrels gliding and fishing and although I never positively identified them, I suspected them to be black-winged..

The third sea day, 27th, brought more swell and white water and brief glimpses of more birds. One guest reported “possibly a shark” from his balcony, just outside the ship’s wash.

Bizarrely we never got to enjoy January 28th as we lost this day crossing the International Date Line! A lot of us are still checking to make sure they give us all our missing hours back before we get home!

At breakfast on 29th, we saw a red-billed tropicbird circling close to our starboard table in the World Café aft as well as black-winged petrels and flying fish. At 0935 we spotted our first confirmed flesh-footed shearwater as well as our first Pacific flying squid. Yes, there really are such things! Like flying fish, they leap from the sea to escape predators but don’t have the pectoral fins/wings. Instead there are membranes between their tentacles which they spread out behind them to glide over the surface.

Another of our regular watchers, Donna Price, was delighted to photograph a shark just below the surface on the starboard side which would have been impossible in the earlier, rougher, seas.



Our last (5th) day before landfall began with Roger and Daryl reporting dolphins at around 0730 and a confirmed sighting of 30+ striped dolphins at 0842. There were almost continual sightings of at least two species of shearwaters and black-winged petrels



(above) throughout the day, including one I rescued from the deck, and at 1735 the first sighting of a grey-faced petrel, a species endemic to New Zealand’s North Island. We also saw what we believe to have been a Giant Petrel but were not able to confirm the species.

Unfortunately we also discovered that as we had begun to expect we would not be going to Bay of Islands after all. A huge storm was ravaging the area causing unprecedented damage and anchoring would be impossible. We hoped to be able to dock in Auckland but there too they were suffering floods, damage and road closures. Thankfully unlike many, our friends in nearby Cable Bay weathered the storm but we were all disappointed that we would not be

able to meet up this year. Jackie Connell has been a friend for years and used to run Operation Sunshine, a wonderful project run in partnership with International Dolphin Watch which helped people in need attend a retreat and interact with truly free and wild spotted dolphins near Bimini in the Bahamas.

Early on 31st we entered the Hauraki Gulf on the way into Melbourne. We were accompanied by a few



Australasian gannets (above), more shearwaters and large petrels with white underwings which we identified as Cook's petrel, (below), a species which breeds almost exclusively on the Barrier Islands at the edge of the Gulf.



As we entered the channel which led us between some of the inner islands, dolphins were sighted not far from the ship. We rushed over to the port side to see them but they had already gone, however Roger had managed a few photographs. When we examined them closely they proved to be orca!

The orca here are being closely studied as a new eco-type which specialises in hunting sharks. Although we were disappointed not to see them ourselves it was great having access to Roger's photographs and also that I was able to share the news with guests later as I had talked about these animals in my Iconic Species lecture.



We had three days in Auckland and around the port, in addition to the usual pigeons and sparrows there were both red-billed and occasionally black-billed gulls, southern black-backed gulls and white-fronted terns to enjoy (below).



Unusually, we had few encounters with dolphins and did not manage any good photographs of them, during this entire 30 day period. Actually there were fewer birds too than on previous trips in this part of the world and this may be an indicator that the substantial overfishing and warming ocean in this part of the world is impacting populations.

In my next feature, we will sail onwards to Sydney, Australia although as I write this we are in Monaco only 10 days away from our return home from this amazing voyage.

Brown Noddy & Orca: Roger Strom

All other images: Robin Petch

www.TheWhaleandDolphinMan.co.uk

Become a Sea Watch Member from only £3.50/mth

Monthly Bulletin or Magazine with whale and dolphin conservation news, features and stories.

members.seawatchfoundation.org.uk