

Kimberley Birdwatching's Ashmore Expedition, November 2016 Summary

By Mike Carter, Rohan Clarke & George Swann (version dated 19 November 2016)

Trip Details

Kimberley Birdwatching's annual spring expedition to Ashmore Reef ex Broome in 2016 ran from 2 to 10 November. This nine day trip differed from previous expeditions in that we spent four, not three, days in the lagoon at Ashmore, and were ashore on West Island eight times. Our return journey to Broome incorporated a visit to Browse Island where we spent part of a morning but we didn't visit Adele Island or the Lacepedes. George Swann of Kimberley Birdwatching (KBW) was responsible for logistics and organisation and secured permission to land on all the islands. The birding personnel were Rae Clark, Michael Hancock, Nigel Jackett, Judy Leitch, Noel Luff, Martyn Moffat, Colin Rogers, Cathy Saywell, Sue Taylor, Jack Winterbottom and John Young with George Swann and Rohan Clarke acting as leaders assisted by Mike Carter. Our boat was 'Kimberley Expeditions' 38m long air-conditioned catamaran MV 'Reef Prince' equipped with two tenders.

We sailed from Broome on 2 November at 08.35 and spent the next two days and nights travelling at sea. On Day 1 we maintained a NW course traversing shelf waters in depths less than 100 m during daylight hours but in the night changed to a NNE heading. Soon after dawn on Day 2 we crossed the shelf break and continued on a northerly heading into deeper waters than we normally traverse. By noon we were in 1,300 m deep water and at sunset in 2,140 m deep water. At sunrise on Day 3 we were in waters over 1,000 m deep heading direct to Ashmore on a NNE course. Having received clearance from the Australian Customs Vessel guarding the Reef we entered the lagoon and were tied up at the inner mooring (12°13.2'S 123°00.3'E) just off West Island by around 12.30. This was our berth for the next three days.

That afternoon and in the late afternoons of the following three days and each morning of the next four days, most of the party went ashore on West Island ferried there by dinghy. Late morning and early afternoon of Day 4, we were taken by dinghy to East Island to observe the seabirds nesting there. We also landed on the adjacent Splittgerber Cay to view the thousands of shorebirds, terns and herons loafing there at high tide. Next day we landed on Middle Island and the adjacent sandbar known as the 'Horseshoe', another high-tide roost for shorebirds and terns.

After a last visit ashore on West Island, we released our mooring at 08.40 on Day 7 (8 November) and when clear of the Reef, sailed directly for Browse Island on a heading of 150°. We arrived after dark and anchored in sheltered waters just beyond the encircling reef.

Commencing at dawn on Day 8 (9 November), we were ferried to the beach on Browse Island and birded there for over 3 hours. Having returned to our mothership, we up-anchored and sailed for Broome at 09.08. We spent that night at sea and arrived back in Broome by mid-afternoon.

The weather throughout was hot and humid. Whilst at sea this was not unpleasant but when ashore walking on bare sand under a cloudless sky, it was extremely hot. We had no rain and generally skies were cloudless. Seas were mainly slight to moderate verging on rough at times on days 1, 8 & 9 and were never completely smooth.

Observations

For most of the time whilst at sea, a continuous log of position and faunal observations was recorded on 'Palm pilots' as well as manually. Each evening, observations at sea and on land were collated at a 'Bird Call'. These results are tabulated and are presented in separate documents.

73 species of bird were identified: 29 seabirds, 24 shorebirds, 6 waterbirds, 2 raptors and 12 landbirds. The more significant observations are as follows.

The three islands within the lagoon at Ashmore that provide nesting habitat for seabirds are severely drought affected (desert-like), being the driest we have seen them in two decades of visits. Much of the vegetation has died. Only one Palm tree remains alive, the one at the grave site on West Island. This has resulted in a major change to the distribution and perhaps abundance of the seabird

population. **Many species have now colonised West Island for the first time at least in recent decades.** Some individuals may be new to Ashmore whilst others may have switched to there from East and Middle Islands. The following are in our experience, new as breeding species to West Island, having eggs or preparing to lay. **Red-footed Booby, Brown (Common) Noddy, Lesser Noddy (up to 30 birds seen), Black Noddy, Bridled Tern (fledged young) and most dramatically, Sooty Tern (> 25,000 birds most with eggs).** In addition **Great Crested Terns** were nesting and we have only one previous record of eggs being laid on that island. Species we saw breeding on Middle and East Islands that have not yet colonised West are Great Frigatebird, Lesser Frigatebird, Masked Booby and Brown Booby.

The lens of fresh water below the surface on West Island remains a viable water source as revealed when the refurbished pump is activated.

Vagrants and migrant land birds observed at West Island were **Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove of the race *Ptilinopus regina xanthogaster*.** This is one of the distinct group of subspecies termed 'Grey-capped Fruit-Dove' by BirdLife International, which due to their lack of a rose-coloured crown are potentially full species that include a very similar taxon *roseipileum*. An **Edible-nest Swiftlet** gave observers and photographers excellent close views for an extended period on 7 November. An individual of the nominate race of **Supertramp Fantail *Rhipidura semicollaris*** regarded as a full species in Eaton *et al.*'s newly published *Birds of the Indonesian Archipelago* was present for the whole of the same day. It has been split from Australia's Arafura Fantail. The two previous reports of this new species for Australia were also from Ashmore. An **Island Monarch** was present each day and we had a **Black Bittern** one day. **Eastern Yellow Wagtails** were seen occasionally but **Oriental Cuckoo** once only. Single Barn Swallows were seen on West Island and Browse.

The highlight on **Browse Island** was **2 Chinese Sparrowhawks, a new species for Western Australia.** Seeing Magpie-larks on remote waterless islands is always an intriguing sight and the three seen on Browse this trip were no different.

At-sea highlights included an **Abbott's Booby**, 36 **Bulwer's Petrels**, 18 **Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels**, 13 Tahiti Petrels, 48 Streaked Shearwaters, 24 Hutton's Shearwaters and 36 Roseate Terns.

The usual **tropical seabirds** that breed locally, Red-tailed Tropicbird, White-tailed Tropicbird, Masked, Red-footed & Brown Boobies, Great & Lesser Frigatebirds, Common & Black Noddies, Bridled, Sooty, Great Crested and Lesser Crested Terns were seen at sea as well as ashore. Ten migrant **Asian Gull-billed Terns (*affinis*)**, now generally considered to be a distinct species, were seen on Splittgerber Cay. Little, Common, Whiskered and White-winged Terns were seen either at sea or at the Reef.

Shorebirds (24 spp.) were numerous and afforded excellent viewing. 3 Oriental Plovers and a Little Curlew were seen on West Island and **7 Asian Dowitchers** were together at the high tide roost at Splittgerber Cay.

Because seas were never smooth, always disturbed or even rough, it was difficult to see marine creatures while sailing. Nevertheless, 7 species of **Cetacean**, including False Killer Whales, Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphins (a pod of 50 around the boat), Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins and Australian Snubfin Dolphins were seen. **Reptiles** included Green (several were laying eggs at Ashmore) and Australian Flatback Turtles and two species of sea snake were seen. **Corals** and colourful **Fish** of many species were observed by those who went snorkelling in the lagoon while hundreds of Flying Fish fleeing our approaching boat kept those watching for birds from the bow on their toes and a huge breaching **Marlin** provided excitement for some diligent observers.

Photos of many of the species mentioned above have or will shortly be posted on participant's personal blogs and on various 'Facebook' birding group's sites.

This trip will be repeated next year. If interested contact George Swann at info@kimberleybirdwatching.com.au, or phone 0429 706 800.