

Of Emus and Fairy-wrens – September 2006

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When I arrived in Sydney at the end of July, I had no firm plans except for a reservation in a hotel for my first night and a reservation for a pelagic trip for mid August. The hotel room meant little to me except it was a place to deposit all of my luggage and gear, but the pelagic, now it was full of possibilities.

But first, let's start from the beginning. Most people out there don't have a clue what I am talking about when I mention a "pelagic trip." Some fishermen have a vague idea and all but the most intense birders just shake their head knowingly. By definition, a pelagic trip is a trip to see those creatures which live on the open ocean, whether they are fish, whales, birds, or anything else that lives in the middle of the sea. In this case, I was after some of the largest, most graceful birds that one can hope to see, the albatrosses of the Southern Oceans.

In order to see, much less photograph these birds, you must do one of two things; either travel to a remote rocky island where they breed or spend some time driving around the open ocean in a boat dumping spoonfuls of ground up dead fish over as chum. Take the stench of dead fish and diesel fumes and combine that with high seas and either a set of binoculars or a camera and it becomes easy to understand why most people who know what a "pelagic trip" is cower at the mention of it.

However, I was not to be turned away and just before dawn on a Saturday morning in August, I was boarding the *Sandra K* with binoculars, camera, field guide and foul weather gear in hand, and Bomine in my system. We departed the port of Wollongong, a couple hours south of Sydney, shortly after sunrise on a crystal clear morning with only a very light breeze - nearly perfect conditions. It didn't take long before the first birds began to show up behind the boat and within an hour or so we had our own little flock of albatrosses tailing behind the boat. I was amazed to find that two species in particular, Black-browed and Yellow-nosed were not only common, but abundant with 25 or more birds of each species behind the boat several times.

As we continued out to sea, other species began to show up including shearwaters, petrels, terns, and many more albatrosses. Now, it should be mentioned that albatross taxonomy is quite a complex, intricate, and controversial topic that I don't pretend to understand, nor want to explore here. For example, Black-browed Albatrosses have two forms, one with a pale eye and one with a dark eye. Some authorities say these are two races or subspecies while others state they are separate species. For my purposes, I am following the former theory for simplicity's sake. I mention this only because as we got further from shore a wide variety of Wandering Albatrosses began to join in the flock behind the boat. Wandering Albatrosses are the largest albatross and we saw at least four of the races of this enormous bird. By the end of the day we had recorded either five or eleven species of albatross, depending on which school of thought you belong too.

As far as photos go, pelagic trips are quite challenging. It is a fantastic chance to photograph these birds but it is far from easy. They are typically in-flight and the boat is always rocking which makes composition more than a bit challenging. Birds like petrels and shearwaters tend to make one pass by the boat and then go on their merry way, so they are even more difficult. Albatrosses have their own difficulties; they are large birds with disproportionably long wings which tend to sneak out of the frame when you aren't paying close attention. That being said, we had nearly perfect conditions and since it was a winter day in the mid to high latitudes, photography in decent light was possible nearly the entire day.

I took full advantage of the D2x frame rate and buffer and used my Epson P2000 until the battery died. Next time I imagine I will be a bit more controlled in my approach and my camera will sound less like a machine gun, but it was my first experience with the classic birds of the Southern Oceans and there was sure never a lack of subjects. Would I do it again? In a heartbeat, no matter the conditions. Would I recommend it to others? Only if you don't



mind the smell of ground up fish, have a sturdy set of sea legs, and an ample supply of your favorite motion sickness medication. Take plenty of flashcards or film and be ready for one of the experiences of a lifetime.

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