



The day with the sting in the tail!!

by Kieran Fahy

What to choose

When asked to write a short note on my best birding day ever, I was informed that many people turned down this invitation. Having considered the task ahead, I can understand why this is so. Asking a birder to select their best day is akin to asking a parent of multiple children to nominate their favourite child!!

Surely, the day I saw Gurney's Pitta, the glittering jewel in the Thai jungle must be it? But no, what about that magic day seawatching in August 1995 on the Bridges of Ross (Co. Clare) when the mega trio of Wilson's Storm-petrel, Little Shearwater and Fea's Petrel drifted past in balmy sunshine? On the other hand, that day of alpine birding in Demirkazik in Turkey with the late Willie McDowell and the gang? Wait a minute, catching the three Critically Endangered specials in two mind-blowing hours in the Taita hills in Kenya has to be the best day ever? Or maybe that treasured memory, finding the first Yellow Warbler for Ireland late one October afternoon on my then local patch in Waterford?

Days all around the world spring to mind, each containing its own special birds, often with great company and always enjoyable, but ultimately I have chosen the day that provided the experience that promises to be unique in my birding lifetime.

Pic. 1. One of the most common seabirds seen on the trip, **White-chinned Petrel** *Procellaria aequinoctialis*, Chile, February 2009.

Photo: Kieran Fahy.

Why Chile?

Late January 2009 saw Jim Dowdall, Seamus Enright, Mike O'Keeffe and I flying to Santiago in Chile to meet up with two American birders, Jeff Gilligan and Gerard Lillie. 'Why Chile?', I hear you ask! In many ways, birding in Chile is similar to that in Ireland. It has a relatively small avifauna - the number of species on the Irish list is roughly equivalent to the total on the Chilean List, albeit the latter containing eight endemics. Also like Ireland, waders, waterfowl and seabirds are particularly well represented and the latter group was to be the focus of this two-and-a-half week trip.

The centrepiece was to be a seabird extravaganza, designed around a cruise liner voyage from Valparaiso in Chile, around Cape Horn and ending in Buenos Aires, Argentina, taking in the Falkland Islands and Uruguay on the way. Other birds were not to be ignored however, with multiple stops along the way that would allow us the opportunity to see some very special land-birds.

Valparaiso & Humboldt Current

For the first few days, we did some very enjoyable birding at the coast around Valparaiso and in the Andes around Santiago (where Diademed Sandpiper-Plover was the highlight, yet another candidate for 'best birding day!'). In order to give ourselves an extra opportunity to see the Humboldt Current seabirds that would not be present farther south and to help familiarise ourselves with seabirds we took a mini-pelagic in a small boat from the port of Valparaiso. This



was a fantastic experience and whetted the appetite for the main event. Amongst the species observed were three species of Albatross (the majority were Salvin's but with small numbers of Buller's and Black-browed), Westland and White-chinned Petrels, Peruvian Diving-Petrels and four Juan Fernandez Petrels, a localised *Pterodroma* species.

It was the latter that flagged the importance of taking photographs, which proved helpful in clinching the identification and would continue to be vital throughout the trip. Also seen were a good number of confusing storm-petrels, many of which were also photographed and the identification discussed and argued over – the two options seemed to be Elliot's Storm-petrel and Wilson's Storm-petrel. Neither of these species seemed to be correct for the birds we were looking at however, as they lacked the diagnostic white belly for Elliot's (which would certainly have been visible in our photographs), and,

Pic. 2. Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*, Chile, February 2009. One of an incredible twelve taxa of Albatrosses seen on the trip!
Photo: Kieran Fahy.

for those used to seeing them in Ireland, the presence of underwing bars seemed to rule out Wilson's Storm-petrel. A conundrum we would return to after the trip ended!!

Puerto Montt

By the 4th of February, after a few days at sea, cruising south parallel to the Chilean coast in bird-filled waters, we arrived at Puerto Montt. This small city is located at the head of the Seno Reloncavi, a relatively narrow sea channel about 200 kilometres in length between Chiloé Island and the Chilean mainland. After disembarking from the boat and a slightly delayed arrival of our local guide, we set out. Our arrival at 0900 meant that we would only have about seven hours in total, including travel time, so we

decided to restrict our birding to just two different habitats and give each a reasonably long time.

Our first stopping point was at a seaside wetland, principally to look for Hudsonian Godwit, which was a major target for the Irish members of the team. Although distant, a large flock of this species was seen, including the black underwing coverts on some. The location was almost reminiscent of birding in some of the rarity hotspots in Ireland, with small numbers of Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs and Hudsonian Whimbrel feeding in the area!! Also present in this area was a gathering of about 50 Franklin's Gulls and two Elegant Terns, in addition to the more local Kelp and Brown-hooded Gulls.

Allerce Andino National Park

Departing from this area, our journey continued to our second destination - Allerce Andino National Park. This magnificent location comprises about 20 thousand hectares of ancient forest, with immense trees. It is almost impossible to convey the majesty of this ancient forest in words – moss covered trees, many of which have stood for thousands of years – even the photographs cannot do the location justice. Although significantly lacking the bird species diversity of rain forests farther north in Peru and Ecuador, the avifauna is rich in quality.

Tapaculos

Restricted to the New World tropics, Tapaculos are a family of birds that could be described as the mice of the avian world as they scuttle in undergrowth from bamboo thickets to the dense mossy understory of cloud forests! Skulking deep within thickets and the understory in Allerce Andino is one of the signature birds of Chile, the elusive Chucao Tapaculo. Fortunately, it often gives away its presence with its distinctive song and we eventually managed to get some good views. This charismatic Tapaculo, with its very distinctive rufous throat and chest is only found in the temperate forests of Chile and Argentina.

We were also lucky enough to see two other Tapaculos here. Magellanic Tapaculo, for all the world looking like a dusky Wren put in a brief showing, while the larger, and frankly better looking, Black-throated Huet-Huet was also seen. The latter species is normally secretive and inconspicuous in its dense forest habitat



Pic. 3. Allerce Andino National Park. The photo gives some idea of the size of the trees in this magnificent location.

Photo: Michael O'Keeffe.



Pic. 4. Chucao Tapaculo *Scelorchilus rubecula*, Allerce Andino National Park, 4th February 2009. Note the wonderful moss covered branches, particularly representative of the area.
Photo: Kieran Fahy.

but showed well enough for us to see the prominent patches of rufous-chestnut on the crown and lower breast, contrasting with the rest of the plumage, which is largely slaty-black.

Lest it be thought that the forest only contained Tapaculos, other birds were also present! Green-backed Firecrown, the local hummingbird, was seen in good numbers and, in addition to the more widespread Thorn-tailed Rayadito, small areas of bamboo in the forest also contained the quirky (and normally skulking) Des Murs's Wiretail. This is a small *Furnarid* with a preposterously long and wispy tail (accounting for about two-thirds of its length) and the sole member of its genus. This species entertained us, showing very well as it fed in a bamboo thicket at point blank range!

Back to Puerto Montt

With time running out before the departure of our ship, we unfortunately had to leave the area. However, even the farmland en route back to Puerto Montt was not without birds, and the open nature of the habitat made these easy to spot. As well as larger birds such as both Southern and Chimango Caracaras and Black-faced Ibis, smaller ones including Austral Thrush, Black-chinned Siskin, Grassland Yellow Finch and Patagonian Sierra-finch were seen. The prize from this habitat however was the Chilean endemic Slender-billed Parakeet, of which we got close views of three, in addition to a flock of the more widespread Austral Parakeet.



Pic. 5. Des Murs's Wiretail *Sylviorthorhynchus desmursii* in bamboo thicket, Puerto Montt, 4th February 2009. The tail can be seen on the diagonal from the bottom left of the picture, looking for all the world like stalks of bamboo!
Photo: Michael O'Keeffe.

More Puzzling Storm-petrels

On return to the ship following our excursion, we decided to opt for a late dinner and take advantage of the departure of the ship to spend the last hour of daylight on deck seawatching. Unfortunately, there were very few birds, the highlights being small numbers of Imperial Cormorants, Chilean Skuas and a few Sooty Shearwaters. The only other seabirds to be seen were yet another group of puzzling storm-petrels. Yet again, these did not look like Wilson's Storm-petrels, and photographs taken by both Seamus Enright and Michael O'Keeffe confirmed details that we could see through our binoculars. The most noticeable features were the presence of both a white belly and a marked pale ulnar bar on the upperwing, features that were present on all individuals (about 50 of which were present). The presence of a white belly once again had us wondering that perhaps these were Elliot's Storm-petrel, but the ulnar bar seemed at odds with this identification. They caused much debate and confusion that evening at our nightly log and the limited literature that was available to us on board did not help in resolving the identification. As it was getting late, and with early morning sea-birding looming the following day, it was decided that further research could be done later, and we all retired after a day of birding where quality had certainly triumphed over quantity.



Pic. 6. Chimango Caracara *Milvago chimango*, Chile, February 2009.

Pic. 7. Southern Caracara *Caracara plancus*, Puerto Montt, 4th February 2009.

Both photos: Kieran Fahy.





A Birding Spectacle

The rest of the trip proceeded in a very similar pattern - fantastic days at sea interspersed with day trips on land that yielded quality birding. Each day at sea brought a different spectacle, with each producing its own dominant species – one day we had about 10,000 Soft-plumaged Petrels, another day approximately the same number of Great Shearwaters and on another, similar numbers of Sooty Shearwaters. Among these were smaller numbers of the real gems – Royal, Wandering, Grey-headed and Sooty Albatrosses, both Southern and Northern Giant Petrels, Grey-backed, White-bellied and Black-bellied Storm-petrels, Cape Petrel, Atlantic, Stejneger's, Trindade and White-headed Petrels, Slender-billed Prion, Pink-footed, Manx and Antarctic Little Shearwaters and Common and Magellanic Diving-Petrels.

A 'fly-past' *Procellaria*-type petrel was probably a Spectacled Petrel, but in the end, we unfortunately had to let it go unidentified as the duration of the observation was rather brief and it was not photographed.

Land-birds were fantastic also, with a great and varied selection of species at each stop, among

Pic. 8. Black-faced Ibis *Theristicus melanopis*, Puerto Montt, 4th February 2009.

Photo: Kieran Fahy.

them such iconic birds as King Penguin, Lesser Rhea, Magellanic Plover and Snowy Sheathbill, to name but a very small selection. By the last evening of the trip there was universal agreement that this was the best birding trip any of us had ever done – high praise indeed given the globe-trotting that had previously been done by all six of us.

The Trip that Kept on Giving

Unlike most trips, where the end is an inevitable anti-climax, this trip became 'the trip that kept on giving'. As the photographers among us worked their way through thousands of images and the more extensive literature available was perused, so certain suspicions were confirmed and forgotten birds identified. Buller's Shearwater, Antarctic Prion and Grey-headed Albatross were confirmed from the photographs and detailed work showed that three subspecies of Wandering Albatross were seen, including the critically endangered Tristan Albatross (considered by some authorities to be a full species in its own right).



Pic. 9 . King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*, Falkland Islands, February 2009.

Photo: Kieran Fahy.

Fuegian Storm-petrel

We also got to grip with the storm-petrels that we had on our mini-pelagic at the start of the trip. It turned out that these were indeed Wilson's Storm-petrels but of the *chilensis* subspecies, often referred to as Fuegian Storm-petrel.

This taxon has a chequered history - Murphy (1936) describes how it was inadvertently first published *nomen nudum* by W. B. Alexander (1928). [In simple terms, *nomen nudum* is a term used to indicate a name that looks exactly like a scientific name of an organism, but fails to be one because it has not been published with an adequate description]. It was described in detail by Murphy (1936) as a new subspecies of Wilson's Storm-petrel. Subsequent to that, the taxon appears to have been "dropped" as a race of Wilson's Storm-petrel as, until very recently, *oceanicus* and *exasperatus* were the only races recognised in the literature, including by Harrison (1983, and in subsequent editions). Interestingly, we found these so distinctive that it seems possible to us that the taxon will in future be raised to full species level.



Pic. 10. Northern Giant-Petrel *Macronectes halli*, Chile, February 2009.

Photo: Kieran Fahy.



The Sting in the Tail

And the other confusing storm-petrels that we had seen in Puerto Montt? Well, these really were the sting in the tail of our trip and took a lot more work. We started by painstakingly perusing the identification literature and examining huge numbers of photographs of the various possibilities, particularly both Elliot's and Wilson's Storm-petrels. This exercise left us no closer to a definitive identification. Circulating the photographs to various experts proved no more conclusive and each response just deepened the mystery as to their identity. During this time, it slowly began to dawn on us that the reason we were unable to put a name to these petrels was because they had never *been* named - incredible as it sounds, we suspected that we had actually found a species new to science!!

A Species New to Science

We published our thoughts on these birds in an article in Dutch Birding (O'Keeffe *et al.* 2009), without formally naming it as a new species, mainly to encourage others to undertake some research on what we felt likely to be a new

Pic. 11. Mystery Storm-petrels *Oceanites* sp., Seno Reloncavi, Puerto Montt, 4th February 2009. Photos: Michael O'Keeffe.

taxon. Peter Harrison (famous for his seminal work, *Seabirds* (1983)) picked up the article and was sufficiently interested in the implied conclusion to mount an expedition to Puerto Montt during February 2011 with the express purpose of answering the question of whether or not this was a new taxon. Having the benefit of more time on site for prolonged research, including trapping examples, Harrison and his team confirmed our suspicions that this was indeed a new species. This culminated in a paper in *The Auk* by a collaborative team (including, most especially, our own team from the 2009 voyage) announcing Pincoya Storm-petrel *Oceanites pincoyae* to the world (Harrison *et al.* 2013)!

It seems unlikely that I will ever again have a part to play, however small, in describing a new species of bird, and so, while it may not literally be the best day of birding I have ever had, the 4th of February 2009 stands out due to its most unexpected outcome!

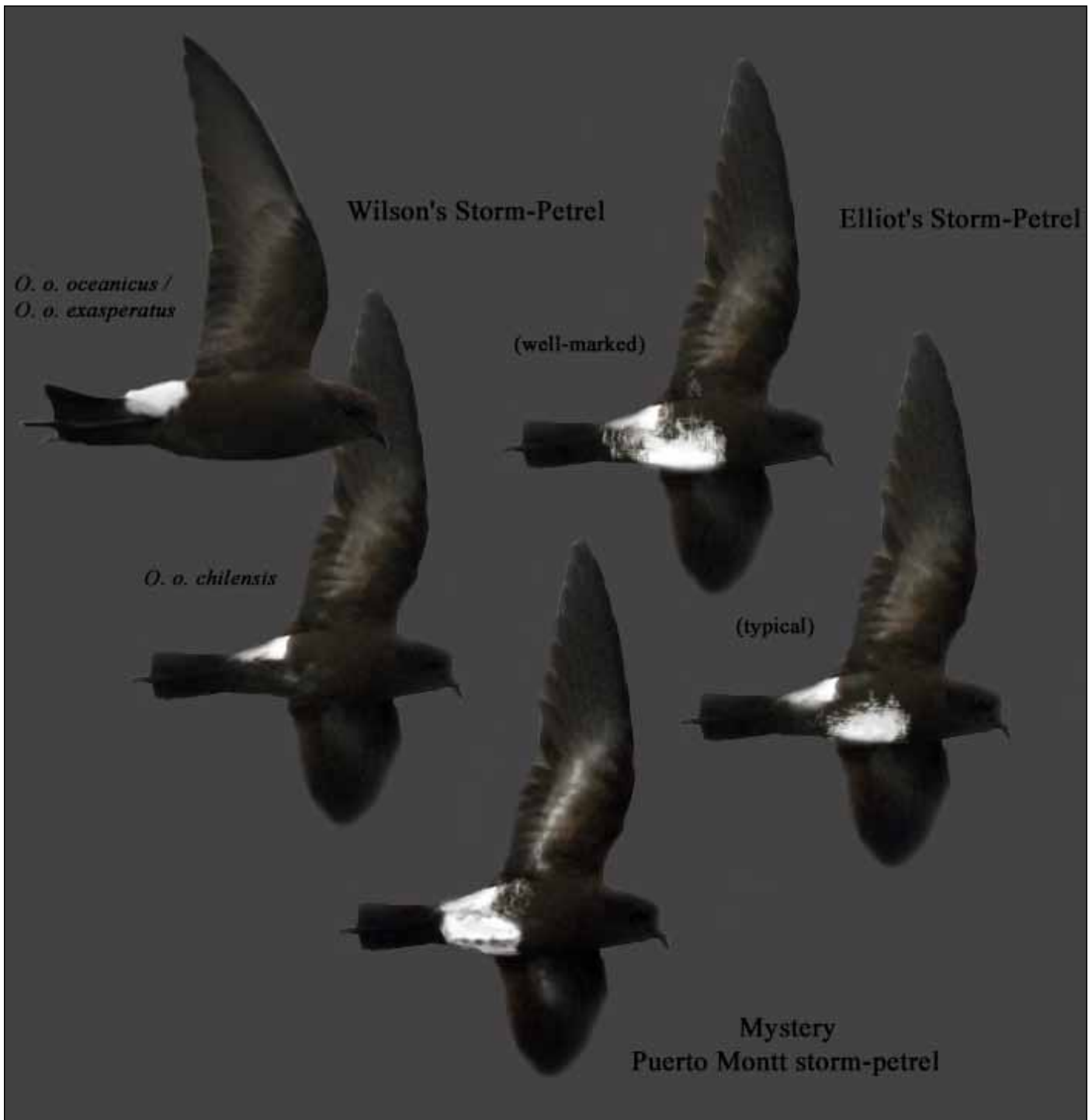


Fig 1. Digital sketch of Wilson's, Elliott's and the 'Puerto Montt' Storm-petrels.

Artist's impression of the mystery Puerto Montt storm-petrel (bottom) together with *chilensis* and *oceanicus/exasperatus* Wilson's Storm-petrels and both a typical and an atypical, well-marked example of Elliot's Storm-petrel.

The Puerto Montt birds show less white on the belly and more white on the vent than typical Elliot's Storm-petrels. Elliot's Storm-petrel also shows a clear divide between belly and rump, along the femoral tract, although this may sometimes be faint or hidden. *Chilensis* is a daintier bird than either *oceanicus* or *exasperatus* and shows some plumage features suggestive of Elliot's Storm-petrel including pale mottling on the belly and a paler underwing panel.

Digital sketch by Michael O'Keeffe.

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Kieran Fahy, March 2016



Pic. 12. Grand Class Cruise Ship, Star Princess

Our ship, the Star Princess, docked at Puerto Montt, 4th February 2009. Most of our seawatching was done from the prow although occasionally we would move to more sheltered areas, including the area immediately above and to the left of the name of the ship as seen in this image.

The Star Princess is operated by Princess Cruises of Santa Clarita, California. She is 290 metres long, displaces almost 11,000 tonnes, can carry over 3,000 passengers with a complement of 1,200 crew and is registered in Hamilton, Bermuda. When all of the passengers disembark at the Falkland Islands, the population of the Islands temporarily doubles to about 6000 from its normal 3000!

Photo: Michael O’Keeffe.