

PUERTO LOMAS PELAGIC: 12/27-28/2013

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Intro: Organized pelagic trips off the coast of Peru have become increasingly popular in birding itineraries, and with good reason. The Humboldt Current is one of the most productive marine ecosystems in the world, as cold, nutrient-rich water is brought up from Antarctica. Upwellings along the continental shelf (which is relatively close to shore here) further contribute to the marine productivity of this region. Despite the entire coastline having excellent pelagic birding potential, most coverage is based out of the Lima area, in many cases for logistical reasons, but also because the waters around Pucusana and Callo can be particularly productive. However, these organized trips are often quite expensive (usually \$150-\$275) and only run on specific dates, making it hard to get offshore for many birders.

One alternative to this was suggested by Gunnar Engblom of Kolibri Expeditions—hiring a fishing boat out of a smaller port town. He said he had done it before with little difficulty and for a relatively cheap coast out of the town of Puerto Lomas, Arequipa (though the town is only an hour collective ride from Nazca). Given the limitations described above, and our desperation to get offshore, my friend and birding companion Justin Baldwin thought we'd give it a shot. Puerto Lomas's location is a perfect setup for marine birds, with the continental shelf and several canyons relatively close to shore, and the Nazca ridge terminates near here as well. We were ultimately very well rewarded, obtaining the first photos of Kermadec Petrels (*Pterodroma neglecta*) in Peru, and documenting previously undescribed presences of Galapagos and Cook's Petrel (*Pterodroma phaeopygius* and *cookii*), along with a fantastic suite of more expected species.

However, we must advise that **this trip is not for everyone**. Before committing to experience, please consider that all vessels that operate out of Puerto Lomas are no longer than 20 feet, and do not have toilets or life jackets. Be prepared to potentially be urinating and defecating over the side of a small, pitching boat for multiple days. Organizing getting offshore was also far from easy, and was pretty much entirely done under the table.

Logistics: Getting to Puerto Lomas is relatively straightforward. It's probably easiest to get there from Nazca, where colectivos (~10 soles) leave from the roundabout when full, roughly at specific times clustered around the late morning and late afternoon. The roundabout is a short walk north from the main bus station. This is in a decent neighborhood, with plenty of places to stock up on supplies, internet cafes, and a couple ATMs around. If you have your own car, Lomas is a straight shot down the Panamerican Highway, with one right turn after about 90km, which is well signed. The colectivos drop you off at the Plaza de Armas in Lomas, from which you can see the docks. Follow the one paved road through what is the main street in town with a number of shops.

Once in town, our first order of business was finding a place to stay. By asking locals, we soon found ourselves checking into the inconspicuous, but very clean, comfortable, and secure Hotel Lomas, costing 25 soles a head per night. Given

the cleanliness, security, and hospitality offered here for a reasonable price, this seemed like the best place to stay in Lomas, though apparently there is a more luxurious hotel somewhere in town.

Our next challenge was brokering a deal to get offshore. Gunnar had told us that the way he had done this before was through the owner of Hostal Don Agucho in Nazca, who also owns the more luxurious hotel in Lomas. This woman—Senora Delcy apparently knew somebody with a boat, who took them offshore for one day, for a price of about 700 soles total for everyone on the trip. Trying to hire a boat through this option was our first intent, so before getting to Nazca, we tried emailing Senora Delcy via the Hotel Don Agucho email address. We didn't get a reply, so went to the Hostal in person to ask about a boat connection. Senora Delcy wasn't around, but when we told the woman at reception who we were and what we wanted, she acted as if she had received our email and was expecting us. Despite this, the only advice she had to offer was to just go and talk to the locals. Not wanting to have gone all that way for nothing, and still eager to get offshore, we followed her advice.

While waiting for the colectivo to leave from the Nazca roundabout, Justin (who must be acknowledged for being the Spanish speaker between the two of us, thus brokering all deals) began chatting with one of the other guys going to Lomas. He seemed willing to take us out, but wanted a hefty price (2,000 soles), and due to his fishing priorities, needed to stay out for at least three days. This was beyond our money and time budget, but once we got to Lomas, he pointed to a trio of guys sitting around on the porch of a house by the waterfront, who were his friends, and said to talk to them. After checking in at the hotel, we approached them, and made our case. We did most of our talking to a younger guy named Kenny. After an hour of just sitting around chatting and drinking, we learned that Kenny and his friends were going out for a week the next day, so couldn't take us, but another one of Kenny's friends, known as El Garfield might be able to. Kenny called El Garfield, and told us all to meet in another hour in the same place.

In this time, we went to town wharf to do some seawatching and enjoy the guano birds, and were approached by an older gentleman who seemed like he had boat connections. We told him what we were hoping for—one day offshore, leaving predawn and getting back in the afternoon, for less than 500 soles per person—but he shook his head saying that the cost of gas was more than that, and we would waste all our time getting far out, and would just have to turn around. He told us to find him later and he might have some connections for us, but in a half our or so we saw him going to sea himself, so that option went down the drain as well.

Once we met Kenny back on his porch, El Garfield was nowhere in evidence, despite Kenny calling him a few times. Losing hope, we said our thanks to Kenny and told him we were going to look around some more for other people to ask. After wandering the streets without luck, we came across Kenny sitting on the sidewalk, in front of a house that turned out to be El Garfield's. El Garfield eventually emerged, and he, Kenny, and Justin discussed our interest. The final outcome was us being offered to tag along on a two-day trip with El Garfield and his crew, for the cost of 1,000 soles. This price covered food, extra gas for going out further than usual, and extra incentive to return to shore after two days if they didn't catch their target fish.

After weighing our options—taking into account time and safety—we agreed, setting a departure time of 8am the next morning, December 27th.

Of course, though we met at 8 sharp, we didn't actually get going until about 10:30. We slept on the boat the night of the 27th and 28th, arriving back in port at 4:30 am on the 29th. We paid El Garfield the 1000 soles back in port, but he also told us to pay another 50 for food. This was almost definitely a scam, but exhausted, we didn't argue.

Conditions: The conditions on this boat were far from the standard met by most organized pelagic trips, and should be strongly considered before trying to embark from Puerto Lomas. All the boats in the harbor were 25 feet long max, equipped with hand-held 65 horse power engines, a radio system for communicating with other boats, and a small cabin in the boat's hull. Some had a mesh cloth erected above the deck for shade, but ours did not. None of the boats have toilets—you go to the bathroom over the edge of the boat, which, if your offshore for more than one day, is pretty much inevitable. Our boat did not have life jackets either.

Despite all this, we felt safe the entire time, and weather was quite pleasant. It was clear the entire time, with no sign of precipitation. Wind was usually pretty calm, but maxed out at about 15-20 mph in the evenings. The waves weren't too big, with mostly 3-8 foot seas, but occasionally grew to 10-12 feet, becoming progressively choppier as the wind picked up in the afternoon. Though this made travel a little bumpy at times, the boat doesn't move very fast, so spray was relatively minimal.

One thing to keep in mind is that the crew liked to blast music from loudspeakers whenever they weren't trying to do something that entailed thought or sleep, so this was an annoyance we got used to, but may have influenced some of the lack of close approach to the boat of many birds.

The food situation was pretty good. The crew consisted of three fishermen—El Garfield, Caesar, and XXX, who did most of the cooking. There was portable gas stove on board, which was used for boiling water, and frying rice, chicken, potatoes and a few other vegetables. We got one fresh, solid meal a day, though there were usually enough leftovers to get by on. Water and Sporade (like Gatorade) were provided. Still, we brought some extra bread, snacks, and drinks for ourselves in town before departure.

At night, we slept in the tiny, cramped little cabin in the hull, where there were some salty blankets and salty cushions to lie down on. Night was when the fishermen got to work, using glowsticks a few different lines to catch large squid, which they would then use as bait for larger fish, their ultimate catch goal. This made the deck pretty wet and slimy over the course of the night, so we stayed in the cabin pretty much the entire time, occasionally emerging to see what was going on. If you have a weak stomach for or morale for watching squids heads get ripped off as they are thrown down on the deck of a boat, gasping their last breaths in a farting sound, it may be one more reason that this trip may not be for you, but it was definitely an interesting thing to see.

Offshore Itinerary: Our initial strategy while birding was to cruise several of the canyons along the continental shelf, some 25-45 km offshore. We had a GPS with us, so went on Google earth the night before departure and entered the coordinates for several points along each canyon (posted below). Since the canyons are just as good for fishing as for birding, it was mutually beneficial to visit them. We spent most of the first day getting to the first canyon, getting there around 3:30pm. We spent the evening and night going through its center. When we woke up the next morning, we had drifted outside the canyon. The crew cleaned up breakfast, threw some guts over the side (good for birds—see below), and went to sleep. We then proceeded to spend 8am-2:30pm sitting in the same spot. For the first hour or so this continued to be productive for birds, but activity quickly petered out. Wishing to respect the crew that had so kindly smuggled us offshore, we didn't nag them to go somewhere else, but waited for them to start doing their routine again. After a long afternoon of birding and sleeping on the deck, the crew finally emerged. Shortly after, we spotted another small boat from Lomas, that appeared to be loaded down with fish. Our crew radio'd theirs, to find out where they'd been, and soon we were moving again—working south along the shelf, but away from the other canyons we'd hoped to visit. Still, we were in deep water, and we found some good birds anyway. We got to their other fishing spot after dark, and after they didn't have much success fishing, headed back to port, arriving at 4:30 on the 29th.

We did buy some canned sardines and vegetable oil, which we combined and let sit in the sun for a few hours to use for chum. Though this worked in short bouts, explaining to the concept of moving upwind and drifting with the chum was difficult to explain to the crew, so when we did pick up birds (only Elliot's and Wedge-rumped Storm-petrels and White-chinned Petrel came in), we couldn't stay on them for long. The blood and guts the crew accumulated and threw off the boat was much more worthwhile.

Birding: Our trip started with us sitting on the boat in port for two hours as we got ready to go. Though definitely a bit frustrating, we were able to pick up all the inshore guano birds, including Red-legged Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax gaimardi*) and Humboldt Penguin (*Spheniscus humboldti*). A decent sized flock of Grey Gull (*Leucophaeus modestus*) took off from the beach across the bay, and flew by at relatively close range. The harbor was also good for rocky coast, with a few Blackish Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ater*), Surfbird (*Aphriza virgata*), Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) and Surf Cinclodes (*Cinclodes taczanowskii*). Terns were moving as well, including Elegant (*Thalasseus elegans*), Royal, (*T. maximus*), and Peruvian (*Sternula lorata*).

Finally getting going at around 10:30, we started hitting Peruvian Diving Petrels (*Pelecanoides garnotii*) about 1km out, at first in pairs, but found several rafts of 2-10 individuals around the shoals 5-6km from shore, finishing with a total of 52. Lots of cormorants and pelicans, some Peruvian Terns and five Humboldt Penguin were present as well in this area, and we had our first Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) 3km out. Our complete inshore checklist can be seen here: <http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S16115664>

From 6-16 km offshore, we started running into White-chinned Petrels (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*), the bulk of our Sooty Shearwaters, and an immature Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrina*) bombing back towards shore. Further out, Pink-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus creapotus*) began to join the mix as well. Other highlights in this zone included Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), and a Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*).

By the time we got 20km out, the wind began to pickup, and we had our first Albatrosses and Storm-petrels among the previously mentioned species. For the rest of the afternoon/evening we totaled 9 *Thalassarche* albatross, only three of which were close enough to ID as Salvin's (*T. salvini*). Elliot's Storm-petrel (*Oceanites gracilis*) began to appear at low density here as well. At 25 km, we caught glimpses of a few Cook's Petrels (*Pterodroma cookii*). These birds were in active molt, contradicting both the molt timing, and expected date of occurrence described in *Birds of Peru* (Schulenberg et al. 2007). After discussion with experts, we concluded that these were immature or non-breeding birds from the Codfish Island population of Cook's that stayed in the productive waters of the Humboldt instead of returning to New Zealand. This species proved to be the most common Procellariid far offshore (>35km), even outnumbering White-chinned petrel and Pink-footed Shearwater.

We arrived at the center of the first canyon (32km offshore) at around 4:30pm, greeted by a distant flyby Chilean Skua (*Stercorarius chilensis*). We told the crew to stop for a bit so we could try chumming, which they agreed to. We dumped some of our sardine/veggie oil concoction in the water and waited. By about five minutes we had drifted about 50 meters from the slick, but could still see a White-chinned Petrel and Elliot's Storm-petrels coming into it. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the trip was when a Galapagos Petrel (*Pterodroma phaeopygia*) appeared 10 meters away from the boat, briefly checking us (and possibly the chum) out before heading further out to sea. Unfortunately we didn't get any photos of this beautiful and close bird, but did obtain some for another Galapagos Petrel seen the next day. Despite much searching in the literature on tubenoses and the birds of Peru, I couldn't find any records this far south of this species.

Continuing down the Canyon in the evening continued to be very productive, with a few more distant *Thalassarche*, and Cook's Petrels, more Pink-footed Shearwaters, White-chinned Petrel, and Elliot's Storm-Petrels. Around 5pm we found our first Black/Markham's Storm-petrel (unfortunately we never found any conclusive Markham's), and at dusk caught sight of our long-anticipated Hornby's Storm-petrels (*Oceanodroma hornbyi*). The day ended with a basic-plumaged Swallow-tailed Gull (*Creagrus furcatus*) following our light after sunset. Even at night the birding continued, with un-identified Storm-petrels making quick passes by the boat, and we were woken up by the crew when a Wedge-rumped Storm-petrel (*Oceanodroma tethys*) landed on the boat, allowing us to examine it in the hand before release. Our offshore checklist for the first day can be found here: <http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S16115611>

We awoke the next morning just before sunrise to a great Storm-petrel show. As the crew cleaned up the deck there, we watched a slow, steady stream of Hornby's Storm-petrels moving from north-south, often passing within 10 m of the

boat. By the time there was significant daylight, the stream had stopped, but we counted 45 individuals. Many Elliot's and Wedge-rumped Storm-petrels passed the boat, as well as another bird we were able to ID as a Black Storm-petrel (*Oceanodroma melania*)—a species south of its mapped range in the field guide. In this early morning, relatively stationary period, other highlights included a few more Cook's Petrels, Peruvian and Black (*Chlidonias niger*) Terns, a distant Swallow-tailed Gull and a Chilean Skua flyby.

At this point (now about 7:30 am), the crew threw a bucket of squid guts overboard. Wedge-rumped and Elliot's storm-petrels were the first to show up, followed by a White-chinned Petrel, but before long two of our three Buller's Albatross for the day came in, separately. The albatross hung around and squabbled over the chum for at least 20 or 30 minutes before continuing on their way. While this was going on, two Long-tailed Jaegers (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) flew by distantly. Once the Buller's had moved on, this opened the doors for other scavengers to come in, and another Chilean Skua—this one very obliging—fed in the guts for another half hour. No sooner than it took off, a Parasitic Jaeger came and harassed the storm-petrels for a little while. Another Buller's Albatross came in as well.

Before we knew it was 9am, and bird activity was beginning to die off. Between intermittent napping, the late morning and early afternoon produced two more Long-tailed Jaegers, a distant Salvin's Albatross, and a single Sooty Shearwater, and several Elliot's Storm-petrels.

Finally, by 2:30, we were on the move again, and with the increasing afternoon wind, picking up more birds. A *Thalassarche* made a relatively close pass, and though initially identified as a Salvin's, later input on photos of the bird revised the ID to a Chatham Albatross (*T. eremita*) based on the extent of a dark hood and a yellowish-green bill. A few more Cook's petrels, Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters put in some appearances too, plus another Black Storm-petrel. Then I spotted a medium-sized, dark compact petrel with obvious white flashes at the base of its primaries—a Kermadec Petrel (*Pterodroma neglecta*)! Though this individual went unphotographed, we saw two more dark morph Kermadecs over the course of the next hour and a half, obtaining the first photographs of this species in Peru. According to the crew and the GPS, we had moved far enough offshore to be in warmer water (45km) so it was nice to see this reflected in the bird community!

Soon the sun was starting to set, and more Elliot's, Wedge-rumped, and a couple Black Storm-petrels began to emerge again, and we spotted another Salvin's albatross. Larids were shifting about too, featuring several Peruvian, and a flock of 17 Black Terns, and our last Swallow-tailed Gull. Seeing more Cook's Petrels provided us with the great opportunity to study their molt and plumage variation in different lightings. We were thrilled to come across another Galapagos Petrel, this one taking its time foraging in bouts of soaring, fluttering, and dropping on the water, allowing for some useable photos. The great day ended with the dusk parade of Storm-petrels, including 6 more Hornby's. An uneventful night of fishing got us back to shore by 4:30am. Our checklist (with photos) from 12/28 can be seen here: <http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S16115284>

Useful GPS coordinates:

-Inshore Shoals: 15°38'41.35"S, 74°52'26.12"W

-First Canyon (four points to follow from northern end to mouth): 1. 15°49'15.75"S, 74°57'5.94"W, 2. 15°51'5.87"S, 74°56'30.06"W, 3. 15°52'36.79"S, 74°57'26.05"W, 4. 15°54'24.85"S, 74°59'41.06"W

-Kermadec petrel location: 15°59'9.38"S, 74°53'24.02"W

-Second Galapagos petrel location: 15°58'28.90"S, 74°50'45.76"W

-See google earth for other canyon locations