

The first confirmed records of Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* for the United Arab Emirates and Oman, in 2011

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Until very recently, the distribution of seabirds in the gulf of Oman off the United Arab Emirates was relatively poorly known. Knowledge was from a scattering of old records made from merchant ships, a small number of mainly coastal trips made by local birders, and, to a greater extent, land-based observations. However, since June 2010, a small but enthusiastic group of local birders have made afternoon boat trips to search for seabirds from Kalba harbour, Sharjah emirate, on the UAE east coast. Most trips have been on a boat skippered by a local fisherman, Abdulla al Zaabi. In 2011 trips were near-weekly mid April–late September and some trips gathered truly pelagic records, ranging up to 50 km offshore. A number of species regularly seen on these trips were previously regarded as exceptionally rare vagrants, or even unknown, in UAE waters. Perhaps the least anticipated was Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*. Indeed, Cory's were seen on three dates mid May–early July in 2011. The OSME Region List (2010) records this taxon as suspected but unconfirmed. The similar looking and closely related taxon Scopoli's Shearwater *C. (d.) diomedea* was assumed to account for records from eg Oman and the gulf of Aqaba, presumably because of its occurrence in the eastern Mediterranean.

RECORDS OF CORY'S SHEARWATER IN 2011

First record

12 May, observers KalD and Derrick Wilby (Plate 1). A single bird was found at 17.15 h, c20 km east-northeast of Kalba. It was first located sat on the water among Persian Shearwaters *Puffinus persicus*. It then flew and was followed at speed for several minutes with the last sighting at 25° 07.400' N, 056° 35.787' E. The area was re-visited two days later but the bird was not present.

Second record

22 June, seven observers including GT (Plates 2, 3). A single bird was found at 16.00 h, c5 km east-southeast of Kalba. The co-ordinates were not noted. It was observed at close range as it flew steadily eastwards.

Third record

1 July, eight observers including OC (Plates 4–7). A large feeding flock of Persian and Flesh-footed Shearwaters *P. carneipes* and Bridled Terns *Onychoprion fuscata* was located at 17.30 h, c24 km east-southeast of Kalba. A single Cory's was seen to settle on the sea among them. The flock was approached and the Cory's Shearwater observed at close range on the sea and then followed for c15 minutes as it flew south. Co-ordinates for the last sighting are 24° 54.772' N, 056° 37.289' E, within Omani waters. The initial sighting was either within or very close to UAE waters.

The Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC) accepted the records as referring to three different Cory's Shearwaters *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, based mainly on plumage aspects and wear. The Oman Bird Records Committee also accepted the third record as a Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*.



Plate 1. Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c20 km east-northeast of Kalba, UAE, 12 May 2011. This is a typical Cory's in every respect and its identification is straightforward. It has a relatively rather large head, broad wings, and heavy bill. Its overall hefty structure eliminates Scopoli's *C. (d.) diomedea* and suggests a male Cory's. The underwing pattern is diagnostic of Cory's. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border between the two feather tracts (particularly clear on the left wing). The under primary-coverts dark spots are not visible. © Derrick Wilby



Plates 2 & 3. Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c5 km east-southeast of Kalba, UAE, 22 June 2011. Not as hefty-looking as the individual in Plate 1, but still a fairly straightforward Cory's. Its structure lies outside of the range of Scopoli's *C. (d.) diomedea*, except possibly the largest males. It certainly is broad-chested and has a fairly large bill. That aside, the underwing pattern is diagnostic of Cory's. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border. This pattern is evident on both underwings, but the left underwing primaries (Plate 3) show a hint of a reflective quality and look slightly greyish. This effect is accentuated when strong light catches the underwing. The under primary-coverts on both wings show two dark spots. © Huw Roberts



Plates 4–7. Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c24 km east-southeast of Kalba, UAE/Oman 1 July 2011. This is not a straightforward Cory's given the photographs. The left underwing pattern in Plate 4 (top left) rings alarm bells when presented as a Cory's. The region of the primaries appears like a pale/whitish triangle, strongly suggesting white fingers merging together in a photographic effect. In other words, it looks like a Scopoli's Shearwater *C. (d.) diomedea*. However, the structure is not typical of a Scopoli's, particularly evident in Plate 5 (top right: bill, head and body) and Plate 6 (bottom left: bill). It is also worth noting that observers saw this *Calonectris* shearwater alongside two Flesh-footed Shearwaters *Puffinus carneipes* and noted that it dwarfed them. Confirmation that we are dealing with a Cory's Shearwater comes from Plate 7 (bottom right). Despite the fact that the photograph lacks detail, it is evident that the exposed primaries are dark. Knowledge of interpreting photographs of seabirds in flight indicates that the dark is genuine and not a result of some shadow effect. The under primary-coverts dark spots are not visible. © Oscar Campbell (Plates 4–6), Steve James (Plate 7)

IDENTIFICATION

The first British record of Scopoli's Shearwater was confirmed with photographs off the Isles of Scilly, 2 August 2004. The official finders' account includes a summary of criteria used by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) to assess claims of Scopoli's Shearwaters (Fisher & Flood 2010). BBRC's criteria were drawn upon by EBRC in their decision making and Adam Rowlands, chairman of BBRC, was consulted and provided further useful feedback. The critical criteria relate to size and structure and, in particular, underwing pattern. Other plumage features such as head pattern are extremely difficult to assess due to the effects of light on the eye and the camera. Even using such criteria, the separation of Cory's from Scopoli's Shearwaters is not always straightforward and, based on current knowledge, some birds cannot be identified to taxon (Howell & Patteson 2008). We draw upon the latter article and our own experiences to discuss the main identification criteria below (in order of importance) and we use the captions to the plates of the three birds in question to apply these criteria and to confirm their identification as Cory's. Also,

the criteria will be useful for birders on future seawatches and pelagic trips in the OSME region.

Underwing pattern

The single most useful criterion for field separation of Cory's and Scopoli's is the underwing pattern, although it is not without its problems. The exposed primaries of a typical Cory's are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white. This gives an evenly-rounded pale/dark border between the two feather tracts. The under primary-coverts typically show two dark spots (Robb *et al* 2008). The spots are dark marks in the outermost two greater primary coverts. These may be visible in good photographs, though some caution is required because the coverts may be out of place or one may overlap the other. The under primary-coverts of Scopoli's are white, like Cory's, but the exposed primaries have white tongues along the inner webs of the outer primaries giving white fingers protruding into the hand. The under primary-coverts typically show one dark spot in the outermost greater primary covert. However, one quality of the underside of the remiges (and indeed the larger coverts) of Cory's and Scopoli's, like all Procellariiformes it seems, is that they are reflective. A Cory's flying away with its underwings catching the light could easily appear to have much whitish in the primaries, suggesting Scopoli's and photographs of such a bird might look convincing for Scopoli's (*eg* see Plate 4). Conversely, the whitish fingers of a Scopoli's might be hard to see if the underwings are in shadow, or the bird is flying against strong light.

Caveats aside, a typical Cory's and a typical Scopoli's, if seen well, can be separated (Plates 8 and 9), but unfortunately not all birds are typical. Some skins of Cory's at the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK, show short whitish fingers, and this is borne out by observations in the field at the breeding grounds (RLF *pers obs*). This did not escape Howell & Patteson (2008) who offered the following guidelines for the underwing primaries: (1) all dark is Cory's, (2) short whitish tongue on p10 only is presumed Cory's, (3) whitish tongue on p9 only is presumed Cory's, (4) whitish tongues on 2–3 primaries among p8–10 is Cory's or Scopoli's, (5) distinct white tongues on 3 or more primaries *including* p10 is Scopoli's. Extensive studies in the Mediterranean and Atlantic hope to clarify matters further (RLF & D López-Valasco *in prep*).

Size and structure

On average, Cory's is an altogether larger and heftier bird than Scopoli's (up to 46% heavier; Thibault *et al* 1997). It is larger-headed, broader-winged, and heavier-billed. However, males average larger than females so that a male Scopoli's may overlap in size and structure with a female Cory's. Thus, it is only male Cory's and female Scopoli's that are likely to stand out in the field as, respectively, visibly relatively large and hefty or small and slight (Plates 8, 9).

Other plumage features

Scopoli's compared to Cory's is said to have a paler greyer head and possibly upperparts, and less grey markings on the chin and throat. However, in worn plumage Cory's dark feathers fade so that the head and upperparts become paler and greyer like Scopoli's. In fresh plumage dark feathers are at their darkest so that the head and upperparts of a fresh Scopoli's are darker than a faded Cory's. In addition, it is well known that light influences the apparent tone of feathers (*eg* overcast skies versus strong sunlight). All in all, colour of the head and upperparts is not a helpful distinction.



Plate 8 (left). Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) diomedea* off Catalonia, Spain, 10 September 2011. A typical Scopoli's. The diagnostic underwing feature of dark bordered long white inner webbings to the primaries stands out in this photograph (particularly important that it shows this in p8–p10). They give the impression of white fingers extending beyond the underwing coverts along the primaries. Also note the slim bill, head and body. Indeed, compared to the Cory's *C. (d.) borealis* in Plates 1–6, this individual looks emaciated and most likely is a female. Note one distinct dark spot in the outermost under primary-coverts. © Ashley Fisher

Plate 9 (right). Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* off the Scilly isles, UK, 1 August 2008. A typical Cory's. Note the large head, broad wings, and heavy bill. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border. Note two distinct dark spots in the outermost under primary-coverts. © Ashley Fisher

RANGE

Scopoli's Shearwater breeds almost exclusively within the Mediterranean, while Cory's Shearwater breeds almost exclusively across the Macaronesian islands in the northeast Atlantic (excluding the Cape Verdes, the breeding islands of the similar-looking but much smaller Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*). Difficulty in at-sea identification of Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters have made it difficult to determine their non-breeding distribution. Del Nevo (1994) and Thibault *et al* (1997) suggested that Scopoli's mainly winters off South African coasts and Cory's concentrates off the eastern United States before moving to the southwest Atlantic. However, on the basis of new field characteristics (Gutiérrez 1998), it was possible for Camphuysen & van der Meer (2001) to identify many Cory's off South Africa, refuting conventional thinking. The regular presence of both taxa off North Carolina, USA, during spring–autumn (Howell & Patteson 2008) and in the central South Atlantic during March–April (RLF pers obs) provides further evidence that the two taxa do not segregate in the non-breeding season. Numbers of both taxa are found off South Africa during November–April and both enter the southwest Indian ocean (*eg* Ryan 1997, Oschadleus *et al* 2001, Camphuysen & van der Meer 2001). This is one possible origin for Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters seen off Arabia and suggests that either form could occur in the region.

Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that Scopoli's Shearwater enters Arabian waters from the Mediterranean via the Suez canal. Indeed, this was suggested by small numbers that summered regularly at the head of the gulf of Aqaba, Eilat, Israel, throughout the 1980s and until the early 1990s (Shirihai 1996). In addition, there are nine accepted records of Scopoli's for Oman, with the most recent in June 2006 (Eriksen *et al* 2012). However, recent records of well-photographed birds from the gulf of Aqaba at Eilat (*eg* up to eight in 2011), after very few records since the early 1990s, all appear to be Cory's (Y Perlman pers comm; see *eg* the front cover of *Sandgrouse* 32(2) which shows the underside of a flying *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* photographed at Eilat, April 2010).

All of this raises uncertainties about Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters in Arabian waters—about the regularity of occurrence, the frequency in each month of the year, and the relative proportion of each taxon. The identification criteria summarised in this paper and the continuation of pelagic trips off the east coast of the UAE should contribute to clarifying matters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the UAE birders who took part in the many boat trips that departed from Kalba in 2011. Derrick Wilby, Dave Clark, Huw Roberts, Steve James, Luke Naismith, Andrew Ward, John Rogan, Simon Lloyd, Gregory Askew and Scott Young were all present on at least one of the 'Cory's trips' and contributed helpful comments, photographs, and companionship in the field. We are also grateful to Adam Rowlands, Trevor Hardaker, Yoav Perlman and Jens Eriksen for providing information. In particular, we thank Abdulla al Zaabi, the skipper; with superb eyesight and skilled boatmanship, he has made it possible for the UAE birding community to get to grips with and enjoy many rare seabirds.

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