



Short-tailed shearwater. Image courtesy of Andrew Silcocks

## Shearwater mortalities in Australia

11 December 2013

Since October, dead shearwaters (*Puffinus* spp.) have been washing up along beaches and coastlines from Queensland to South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. The majority of the birds have been the short-tailed shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). Short-tailed shearwaters are a widespread, abundant seabird species, with a worldwide population in excess of 18 million animals. They spend approximately six months in Australia nesting and breeding before returning to their wintering grounds in the northern hemisphere in April. A number of other shearwater species have also been reported washed up on beaches, including: wedge-tailed (*P. pacificus*), fluttering (*P. gavia*) and flesh-footed (*P. carneipes*).

The conclusion is that this is a 'natural but unfortunate event'<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>, with birds having died from exhaustion and starvation, following their long annual migration from the northern hemisphere to nesting areas in the southern hemisphere. Birds are often in poor condition and have limited energy reserves, having travelled over 15,000km. Die-offs occur annually, however this year has seen an extensive and widespread number of deaths. Severe weather and difficulty finding sufficient fish stocks during their migration are considered to be contributing factors<sup>5,6</sup>.



Short-tailed shearwater. Image courtesy of Andrew Silcocks

The potential for diseases to be involved as a part of the cause of the mortalities is being investigated; a number of birds have been submitted for necropsy from a number of locations in NSW, Vic, Tas and WA. All have showed similar results, including muscle wasting, emaciation and evidence of starvation. Some infectious diseases including avian influenza and Newcastle disease have been excluded by PCR in the events in Qld, NSW, Vic, Tas and WA. Infection with West Nile Virus was also excluded by PCR in birds from NSW.

If you see a large number of dead birds on a beach, you can report the event to your local [AWHN Wildlife Coordinator](#) . If you find any live birds that are obviously unwell or injured, please contact your local veterinarian or wildlife carer group for advice. A recent media release is available from [Birdlife Australia >>](#)

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### References:

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/media/OEHmedia13112101.htm> (21/11/2013);  
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/media/OEHmedia131001.htm> (10/10/2013)
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/Home/Full\\_newsevents\\_listing/News\\_Events\\_Listing/131025-shearwater-migration](http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/Home/Full_newsevents_listing/News_Events_Listing/131025-shearwater-migration) (25/10/2013)
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.esperanceexpress.com.au/story/1915395/departments-confirms-numerous-bird-deaths/> (18/11/2013)
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.depi.vic.gov.au/about-us/media-centre/media-releases/shearwater-breeding-season-has-arrived>
- <sup>5</sup> Baduini CL et al. (2001). Mass mortality of short-tailed shearwaters in the south-eastern Bering Sea during summer 1997. *Fisheries Oceanography*, 10(1), 117-130.
- <sup>6</sup> Haman KH et al. (2013). Great shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) mortality events along the eastern coast of the United States. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases*, 49(2), 235-245.