

BIMBOS AND SABINE'S GULLS



“And you think the one who did that to your face is the same one who killed the eagle chick?”, asked Gerry as we sat back in our seats and drove away from the village square in the direction of Lleida.

“More than think it, I’m sure it was that bastard” I answered.

Gerry was referring to the events that had obviously occurred on my face; my right eye was well bruised, and the area of forehead above it swollen and blood-stained.

I looked at them, Ton’s countenance in the rear view mirror was wearing an open grin, as was Gerry in the passenger seat.

“Weren’t you ever told that it’s not polite to laugh at other people’s misfortunes?” I complained, at which point they were unable to restrain themselves any longer, and both burst out into shameless laughter.

Well, my battle scars would certainly give us something to talk about on that long drive to Gijón. Ton and Gerry had arrived in Bovera at around 7 in the evening, and with the briefest of formalities I had taken leave of my wife, my 20-month old son and the in-laws, had helped the guys to move their bags and scopes into the boot of my car, and had eagerly set off on the first leg of our first Cantabrian cruise. If all went according to plan, this time tomorrow we’d be sailing back into the harbour of Gijón with light heads and self-satisfied smiles. And behind us one of those birding days you were never going to forget.

I had come up with the idea of hiring a yacht for the day and sailing directly into the Cantabrian sea after perusing through an article in the birdwatcher’s monthly journal “British Birds”. The article dealt with the subject of the “Chalice petrel”, a bird which had been seen and photographed by a group of birders from aboard the ship called Chalice, and which some believed to be a Matsudaira Petrel, and others a Bulwer’s Petrel. Whether it was one species or the other was something I was happy to leave to the experts; no, I must confess my real interest in the article was not in the “Conclusions” section but rather in the “Methods” part. To hire a ship, to sail out to sea and to feast my eyes on a whole load of seabirds, some of which I had never seen before.

Now few are the seasoned birders who would deny having a soft spot for seabirds. Although why exactly they are held in such tender regard is not quite so easy to explain. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that marine birds are encountered so rarely in the normal course of activity of land-based birdwatchers. Subsequently, it goes to reason that as “absence makes the heart grow fonder” the average birder acquires a deep longing to fill the gaps in his observations, gaps which glare at him as he flicks past the pages in the guide describing petrels, shearwaters, skuas and the like. In addition, part of it may well be open admiration for the intrinsic beauty of the birds themselves. Or for their lives on the open waves. Some perhaps are motivated by the challenge of finding and identifying these pelagic creatures. And some, enlightened, would ask “Is it necessary to have reasons?”.

So, all things being as they are, one of the basic facts of life that should be explained to the novice birder is that sooner or later he will have to go seawatching. Which is a task that may just be a little more daunting than it would seem at first sight. For how often has the scene been repeated, whereby the as-yet uninitiated stroll down to the designated site with the best views of the rolling sea before them, casually joking and jostling with their birding mates, only to slip sheepishly away, perplexed and dumbfounded an hour or so later? Many new recruits will have gone into a deep sulk, visibly upset and incredulous at how their colleagues were claiming to identify birds flying by, birds seen for less than a minute at impossible distances, even on the horizon! What kind of collective madness was it that possessed their otherwise credible colleagues to nod in agreement when another claimed that that pale form seen bobbing momentarily on the crest of a wave was a juvenile red-throated diver? Especially when it had disappeared from view while some were still fumbling with their telescope’s focusing ring.

Until that day at Gijón some of my own most memorable seawatching experiences were had on board the Caledonian MacBrayne ferries, plying the routes from Oban or Ullapool on the Scottish mainland over to the remote Outer Hebrides. Even now I can recall some of the excitement I felt when I set eyes on my first storm petrels, Manx shearwaters and skuas, there in the Sound of Mull or the Little Minch. Furthermore, the agreeable position of having free and easy access to hot coffee from the ship's cafeteria meant that my initiation into the world of seawatching had been an unusually gentle one. No, Caledonia MacBrayne was most definitely not a bad way to start. However, after a couple of early summer trips I needed something more. So when autumn came I found myself scrambling over windblown rocks, intent on reaching what was then the best seawatching point on the whole of the island of Cape Clear, off the emerald coast of Eire. Once in place on my rocky throne I commanded excellent views over to Fastnet Rock and the watery expanses beyond. Unfortunately, I was never able to be there before October, by which time most of the interesting seabirds had already passed by. So I needed more. Thus, as autumn gave way to winter, my most commonly played seawatching card was to spend as many lost hours as possible squatting on the shingle bank at Cley in north Norfolk, staring out to sea while realising that 6 layers of clothing was nowhere near enough to keep out the eye-wateringly bitter northerly wind. A wind which was buffeting me, with compliments, straight from the Arctic circle.

Little wonder then that I still cherished fantasies about Wilson's and storm petrels, little and great shearwaters, long-tailed and pomarine skuas, roseate terns and Sabine's gulls. Above all, Sabine's gulls. Not because they were the rarest among this special group, but rather because they were the most elegant, beautiful gulls that I could imagine, and for many years now I had been drooling over the prospect of setting eyes on them. If only for a minute or two.

The Sabine's gull is the third smallest gull in the western Palearctic, only a little bigger than Ross's gull and about 15% larger than the appropriately named little gull. In flight its upperwings show a characteristic pattern constituted by 3 distinctly-coloured blocks of black, white and grey. The adult bird has a dark grey hood with a narrow black ring around its margin, and a black bill with a broad yellow tip. Slim, long-winged, almost dainty; for all this and more the Sabine's gull is surely one of the most handsome and immaculate-looking seabirds that one can reasonably hope to set eyes on in the northern Atlantic.

A friend informs me that there's actually a curious connection between the Sabine's gull and the Ross's gull, the other dainty Arctic beauty. Apparently the Sabine's gull was discovered during exploration of the northwest passage and was subsequently named after its describer Edward Sabine, a friend and companion of James Clark Ross, who in turn gave his name to...well, surely you can guess.

The Sabine's gull breeds in marshy tundra near the coast from subarctic areas to the high Arctic. Out of the breeding season it is a highly pelagic bird, a true seafarer, nowhere more at home than over the crest of an ocean wave. In late summer, having finished with the onerous task of breeding, Sabine's Gulls make their way southwards towards the equator and beyond, where they will spend the winter searching cold water upwellings for their food of invertebrates and small fish. The species has two separate populations, a fact illustrated by their different migration strategies: birds breeding in Siberia and Alaska winter off the Pacific coast of South America, while Canadian and Greenland breeders do so in the South Atlantic ocean, off the coasts of southern Africa.

From August through to November a nomadic spirit stirs with a shudder from the embrace of the cold northern seas and takes hold, first of the adult birds who are now free to leave after satisfying their parental duties, and later of the juveniles, eager to ply the skies on a maiden flight that may take them almost to the other side of the world and back again. Departing from their natal Greenland the gulls move southeast across the Atlantic towards Iberia and western Morocco before turning south into the Canary Current. From here some will continue down along the western coast of Africa and past the Cape of Good Hope, only returning to Greenland the following year when the days

are much longer than the nights. By then the most adventurous will have travelled approximately 14,000 kilometres, through gales and raging storms, through the doldrums, never setting foot on land, but all the time blissfully free from winter's dark clutches. Like shining white figures, cleansed by sea and wind, on an eternal quest for the midnight sun.

It was August in Spain and as usual the summer holidays drew on long, hot and lazy. So Ton and Gerry didn't need much convincing when I phoned them to sell the idea of a pelagic trip later that same month on board an 11-metre sailing boat, complete with skipper. In his usual fashion Gerry spread the word and soon had 2 more adepts lined up. They were Xavi and Rodrigo from Barcelona, and they would meet us near Gijón harbour, on the north coast of Spain, on the morning of the trip. I couldn't believe it! Five birders going on a pelagic trip which I was almost sure I would have to do alone! I counted my good fortune in having such wonderful acquaintances who had almost as many loose screws in their heads as I did!

The return trip from Lleida to Gijón was an estimated 1,400 kilometres, admittedly a long one, but not much if you compared it to the 14,000 kilometres which the Sabine's gulls undertook every year. Certainly not much if you considered that we were doing it sitting on our backsides in a petrol-driven, power-steered Rover, while the gulls navigated the high seas from the Arctic to the tip of Africa and back by virtue of their own pectoral muscle power. But back in the car night had fallen out on the tarmac trail, and it was not long before gulls and the like were far from our minds, as we punctuated yawns with coffee breaks and the odd toilet stop. At last the first suffusion of dawn light saw all five of us, having met up with Xavi and Rodrigo as arranged, pottering along the sea front at Gijón, looking for a bar or café that would be convenient and kind enough to be open at just after 6 in the morning. And to serve us all with hot *cafés con leche* and a fresh croissant or two. To my eternal surprise and gratitude, we found one.

"Christ! What happened to your face?" came the impulsive question as we sat down at the coffee bar table. It was Xavi, one of the newcomers, who had asked. I couldn't help thinking that it didn't say much about Xavi's powers of observation if he had only just noticed my swollen black eye and Gorbachov forehead mark. I kept the thought to myself, however, and just as well! Later that same day, and in the years to come, Xavi revealed himself to be one of the hottest, keenest and on the ball birders in the whole of Spain, even at his then tender age of 18. Thinking on it now, that was probably why he hadn't noticed my bloody ailment until then, as birders of a certain calibre rarely focus on things at such close range. Or on everyday banalities. No, they only have eyes for birds, swayed by the knowledge that, more often than not, the most interesting birds haunt far horizons, whether these be over land, sea or on the limits of one's own imagination.

I had a captive audience. So I swallowed and explained the story again. Now, even more than before, I felt the anger and a seething desire for revenge well up within me with every word I spoke. I told them how, the day before, a huge 4-wheel drive towing a trailer came speeding into the village square, almost running over Alex, my 20-month old toddler, set on trying out his motions on his little red bicycle with stabilisers. I recounted how I followed the vehicle to where it stopped outside an open garage in a side street, intent on letting the driver know of the dangers he could cause with such reckless speed. I didn't know who he was, nor did I care. I had to tell him what was what, and nothing more. I saw him in the entrance of his garage and as I approached he looked in my direction. At that moment I should have known that the ensuing conversation was going to be less straightforward than it was supposed to be. The more or less formal exchange I had anticipated went along the lines of:

"Excuse me"

"Yes?"

"I've come to ask you not to drive so fast through the village. As you know there are lots of children about in the summer, and in fact you came pretty close to running over my son."

“Yes, I know. I realise that it was very careless of me. I’m sorry. I didn’t frighten your son did I?”

However, one look at his ruddy, taut face, narrow eyes, pouted lips and mean eagle-beak of a nose should have been enough to tell me to hold my tongue and let things pass, just for once. But of course I didn’t.

“Hello”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve come because you were going very fast through the village and...”

“You what?”

“I said you were going very fast and almost ran over my son.”

“How I drive is none of your business, jerk. What’s a prick like you doing in this village anyway?”

“If I’m a prick then you’re a son of a whore”, was my brilliant rebuff.

Before I knew it his right fist had flown out and connected with my left cheek.

“No-one calls me a son of a whore”, he spat.

The biggest effect of the surprise blow was to inflame my retaliatory tongue.

“Why not?” I asked, “Do they think of better insults for you, you son of a whore?”

The second blow he delivered to my right eye; it hurt more than the first and was responsible for the visible marks that I bore with me to Gijón. I was now getting too angry for intelligible words, and had moved to act. In order to deliver a physical response I had to get to my adversary over the other side of the gap between the car and trailer which separated us. He had already backed off a little and so I leapt onto the hood of his car, ready to deliver a flying kick to his stupid jaw.

A couple of hours later, topped up with coffee, croissants and barely-controlled expectation, we parked alongside the harbour buildings on the seafront, overlooking the moorings. How spacious! Ours were the only cars there at that time of day. All arrangements had been well made and before long we were drawing out of Gijón harbour into the Cantabrian sea, aboard the *Estrella del Norte* with our skipper Roberto at the helm. Now five pairs of hands were eagerly clutching their respective Zeiss, Swarovski and Nikon dangling over midriffs, poised for action. Our mission: to form a ring of surveillance through which no living bird could pass without being seen and identified. I was the self-appointed group secretary who would take note of the proceedings, including the birds seen, the time of observation and approximate distance from the coast. The others appointed themselves to the roles that came most naturally to them: keen-sighted Xavi was the early-warning bird alert system, well-read Rodrigo was the chief librarian and identification counsellor, talkative Gerry was the intercom system, and biological Ton provided on-board entertainment, noisily broadcasting his bodily functions with a surprisingly dignified air.

We swung past the harbour walls and shortly the only sound was the noise of the yacht’s motor driving us towards placid blue skies. The lightest of breezes cooled our foreheads, too light in fact for Roberto to hoist the sail and turn off the engine. We quickly acclimatised to the novel environment, and like hungry hawks our restless eyes began scanning the waves and the sky alike, searching for our feathered prey. Every now and then I stole a quick glance in the direction of the coastline: just a land-lubber making sure he was still safe! But today the sea extended us a gentle welcome. It was benign. It was calm, so calm its surface looked like a silvered mirror.

Calm is fine for novice seafarer’s nerves. But anticyclones and ripple-less seas were precisely the weather conditions that you would never want if you were sitting on a rocky headland somewhere along the eastern Atlantic seaboard in late summer or early autumn, waiting with patient hope to spot a passing Sabine’s gull or two. No, what you really needed was a damn good westerly gale, with howling winds which would buffet the birds out on the high seas and whisk them close to the shore, where you and your telescope would be strategically positioned. If your telescope was still standing, that is, or if it hadn’t been rendered virtually unusable by wind-driven drizzle and salt spray. Or if you hadn’t taken a moment’s refuge from the driving winds, warming yourself in a conveniently sheltered little alcove formed naturally by the rocks, at the very same

moment that a Sabine's gull, the only one of the whole day, was wheeling by at breakneck speed.

On mainland Britain the best place for encountering Sabine's gulls in August or September is undoubtedly St. Ives Bay in Cornwall. There the passage of a deep depression pushes birds from the Atlantic up into the Bristol Channel, and then with a little luck the subsequent northwesterlies will force them close to this Cornish headland. Such a dreamed-of combination of favourable meteorological conditions actually occurred in September 1982, when an exceptional flock of about 100 summer-plumaged adults took shelter in the bay throughout the day. The birders gathered there that day could hardly believe their good fortune. They rubbed their eyes repeatedly, looked again and pinched themselves, and then they pinched their nearest neighbour for good measure. No, they weren't dreaming. At the start of the day there were very few among them who would not have been thrilled to see a single Sabine's gull passing by at a reasonable distance from the coast. Now there were a hundred or so of these superb birds flying in all directions around the bay right before their eyes! What an honour to have been among the chosen few! Even to this day, more than 20 years after that historical birding event, the lucky ones still greet each other with a knowing nudge and wink.

Five years later, on the night of 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> October 1987, poorly-predicted storm-force winds wreaked havoc on southeast England, London included. As the population awoke from a sleepless night and contemplated the extent of the damage that the storm had left in its wake, many a sad hand was raised to a poor head in gestures of shock and dismay. Woodlands and gardens were decimated, their best trees toppled and strewn this way and that; roads and railways were blocked, cars crushed under fallen trees, roof tiles and chimneys smashed to the ground.

But one man's pudding is another man's poison, or something like that, and it is an undeniable fact that certain collectives were rubbing their hands in glee at the new prospects that had opened up before them. If we apply basic logic to the situation then it's not hard to see how hardware stores, gardening and landscaping companies, roofers, bricklayers and the like could all extract some economic benefit from the unfortunate situation. But birdwatchers? What did they stand to gain? And why were so many of them not able to make it to work that morning? Sure enough, public transport in the commuter belt had been dealt several hard blows, and a good number of trains and even coaches were cancelled. So then perhaps it was out of sheer frustration that so many of them packed their scope and binoculars, got in their cars and drove to the south coast, or their nearest inland reservoir. Perhaps. Or perhaps it was because those very same gale force winds which had buffeted southern England had also snatched up hundreds of Sabine's gulls from the Bay of Biscay and deposited them along England's southern coast. Altogether there were 120 reports of these rare avian gems seen from England's shoreline on the 4 days immediately after the storm, and a further 60 birds were also located on a variety of inland waters. Needless to say, perhaps, is that I was elsewhere.

Back on board the *Estrella del Norte* our bird detector network was about to deliver its first juicy fruit. Two pale, spangled terns flew buoyantly over our heads as we all followed their progress with bated breath. The birds, unperturbed, continued their westward course. Pensively we all lowered our binoculars and cast urgent, questioning glances at each other. A few seconds later Rodrigo had whipped out all the pertinent bibliographical material and in turn we all consulted and assuaged any doubts we may have had: Roseate terns! "*Bimbo!*"

A flash of human electricity leapt through the air, and an upswelling of emotion took hold of all, except Roberto of course, who was showing the first obvious signs of bewilderment at our behaviour. We jumped up and punched the air. We cheered. Rodrigo and I embraced each other while jumping up and down rhythmically, spinning around at the same time, just like a couple of football louts celebrating their team's victory. Ton tried out a little jig. Gerry and Xavi did a "give me five" handshake. "*Bimbo!*" rang out loud and clear in the ocean air. Ton, high in spirits, extracted a

packet of Hobnobs from his backpack and offered them around. We all accepted and took a celebratory bite of our biscuit, followed by a slurp of ice coffee from Gerry's thermos.

Roberto looked on from where he sat at the helm, bemused but doing his best to humour us. We owed him an explanation: the word "*bimbo*" (lifer in British English, or life-bird as the Americans would say) was one of the most significant words in the birding world, and many of our fraternity would go to great lengths to be able to proclaim they had just seen a *bimbo*. In definition it was seeing and recognising a species of bird that you had never set eyes on before. In practice it was an apotheosis of one of the main branches of modern birdwatching. It was a thrill that few of those who had experienced would ever be willing to relinquish. It was the conversion of visual signals into endorphins, which apparently exercised quite an array of strange effects on otherwise normal human beings.

But there was no resting on our laurels. Before the top was back on the thermos a small black bird with a white rump flew past with a decisive direct flight action, almost skimming its belly along the surface of the glimmering sea. A house martin? Out here in the Atlantic Ocean? No, of course we knew better than that, it was obviously a petrel. A storm petrel, and another of evolution's wonders. A pelagic bird no bigger than a chunky house sparrow, whose only use for terra firma was as a breeding ground. Favoured exposed, undisturbed islands and islets, the remoter the better, these enigmatic creatures of the high seas would only approach land under the cover of darkness. A fitting tribute to the moon, maker of the waves which they endlessly plied, and of the moonlight which spoke in whispers of the eternal universe.

More storm petrels came and went. The breeze picked up and Roberto opened the sails and cut off the ship's engine. Now we really were sailing! In a quiet moment I turned and realised that I couldn't see the comforting outline of the coast. It no longer seemed to matter. Out here it felt like the calm before a storm that was never going to come. A playful school of dolphins found us, and we held their attention for a scintillating ten minutes. Several of them took turns in swimming in the shade of the prow, their sleek forms clearly visible through the ozone blue water, and after having a good back scratch or two on the ship's hull they had left as unexpectedly as they had arrived.

Time sailed discreetly by. Mid-day passed unnoticed by all, the breeze dropped once more, and there were now few birds to be seen. With the sun beating down on our foreheads, already burned rosy red, the invitation offered by the cool, blue sea - a dip and a splash in its refreshing waters - would have been foolish to resist; that is, had we not been men with a mission. So resist we did. We sat there, feet dangling over the edge of the ship and our bodies propped up in a variety of positions, mesmerised by the sound of water swishing against the ship's prow, gazing into the white froth and spray droplets, a fusion of air and water.....

Froth...he was frothing at the mouth. Like a rabid dog. Poised on his car bonnet I was ready to deliver a flying kick. I was an angry Bruce Lee and he was a rabid dog. I tensed, and then quicker than lightning two hysterical women came in screaming between me and my aggressor. They were his wife and mother-in-law. Both were short, overweight and completely out of control. I backed down and was making to move off; my antagonist must have interpreted this as weakness on my part, and emboldened anew he came threateningly towards me. I turned and faced him and he stopped in his tracks. Again the crazy chicken-women came a-clucking and a-squawking, a couple of neighbours joined in and I was soon hemmed in against a wall. With faultless opportunism my enemy tried to deliver a punch at my face over the shoulders of the people crowding around me. I retorted verbally as before. He went away purposefully to his car, pulled a stubby hunter's bludgeon from under the driver's seat and came back, hoping to knock me senseless with it. I gawped in disbelief.

Wait...a large shadow passed over the crowd. I instinctively glanced upwards and found myself looking into the orange-yellow eye of a big, white eagle, perched on the edge of a roof overhanging the narrow street. It let something fall from its bill, there

was a sudden gasp of horror from the crowd and everyone stepped back. A long, wildly writhing, green and yellow snake now lay between them and me. Freed, I sprang at the opportunity and pounced on my opponent like a black panther, pinning him to the ground. I threatened him with his own bludgeon and he broke down and confessed everything, also pleading for a number of other offences to be taken into account. The bearded neighbour who had previously pushed me up against the wall now approached, put him in handcuffs and read him his rights. His mother-in-law fainted on the spot, while his wife wailed and ran at me, trying to scratch at my eyes. Just then an ambulance pulled up, two men in white coats hurried out and bundled in the mother-in-law and wife. As they sped away again I read the words "Psychiatric hospital" on the closed doors. My wife came running, shouting "Steve! Steve!"

"Steve!" I opened my eyes with a jolt, wondering who and where I was. Gerry's exclamations oriented me, "A pomarine skua!". Blinking in the bright sunlight I made a great effort to pull my thoughts together, wipe the saliva from the edge of my mouth and to look in the direction he and Rodrigo were pointing. I studied the bird as it flew over us towards the Spanish coastline: it was indeed a pom. I was suddenly wide awake - nice one lads!

"Bimbo?" Roberto asked.

"Bimbo!" replied all .

All too soon however we had to resign ourselves to the idea of turning back towards the coast. Roberto edged the vessel into a wide loop in the wake of a fishing trawler when three white birds appeared to us, flying in from the east. Three ghostly white birds enveloped in an eerie sea of silence. They came steadily closer, and one by one we bit our lips, not daring to shout out what we all knew, until there no longer remained even the remotest shadow of a doubt. Rodrigo was the first to succumb to the overpowering temptation, and, as he shouted "Sabine's gulls! Sabine's gulls!" our minds echoed his words. We watched, now speechless all of us, as these graceful phantom-like forms sailed through the air over the wide-open ocean, like three will o' the wisps. And we kept watching until they disappeared from our earthly sight, deep into the realm of what? Memories.

We bit into the last of Ton's Hobnobs. Now all that was left was the icing on the cake. Roberto steered the Estrella del Norte due south once more until, at little more than a mile from the coast, our skipper drew a westward course, parallel to the lie of the land. Steep rocky cliffs were now the backdrop to a completely new conjuncture of birds, including flocks of 4 species of shearwater: Cory's, Balearic, Manx and sooty. Gerry was particularly impressed by the latter species.

"That is the only bird I've ever seen in Europe which breeds in the southern hemisphere" he declared, authoritatively.

"And it's come an awful long way just to see our ugly mugs" said Ton.

Rodrigo interjected, not wanting to miss an opportunity of putting his bibliographical knowledge to the test, "The sooty shearwater, is in fact a bird with a migration record even more impressive than that of the Sabine's gull: it breeds in subantarctic areas and then migrates to the northern hemisphere, many birds passing along the eastern Atlantic up to Newfoundland and Greenland..."

"And Europe."

"Newfoundland and Greenland", he repeated, not welcoming the interruption, "before crossing to European waters and then continuing down parallel to the coast of Africa."

"And from there?" asked Roberto, surprising us all by his sudden interest in a seabird's migratory movements.

"Well, from there birds return to their cool subantarctic breeding grounds off Cape Horn and around New Zealand."

"Wow."

Xavi, who had appeared not to be listening to Rodrigo's explanations, suddenly spoke up, "Sparrows!" he said.

We all turned to him, baffled.

“What about sparrows?” Gerry asked.

“Well, you said that the sooty shearwater was the only bird that you had seen in Europe which bred in the southern hemisphere, but I believe that house sparrows breed somewhere in Australia, maybe New Zealand.”

“And what about ospreys?” I asked, “And peregrines...and...”

“Come on! You know what I mean!” said Gerry.

The evening shadows were growing long and a cool breeze was blowing when we finally reached the port of Gijón and fell off the yacht, exhausted. We were all red-faced on the outside, and glowing on the inside as we bid Roberto farewell with hearty handshakes. The ground was swaying slightly as we stepped ashore, onto a quay bustling with the signs of life so typical of a seaside town at the height of the summer season. There, in the now crowded car park a parking fine flapped at me from under a windscreen wiper, as if to say “Welcome back to the real world”. I shrugged, that was life. Receiving an odd look or two from passers-by reminded me of my war wounds. The swelling seemed to have subsided and a thick scab had set over my right eyebrow. *Time heals*, I reflected, *and much more quickly if there are birds to watch*.

We all took a last glance at the Cantabrian sea, got in the car and started the long trip back to our homes in Lleida or Barcelona.

But driving the 700 kilometres or more that separated here from home was such an unenviable prospect for 5 people who had hardly slept at all in the last 36 hours that it wasn't long before we had to stop at a roadside *pension* in a small village alongside the quiet coastal route. It was a unanimous feeling that there was some serious resting to be done, but not before a drink or two had capped our happy achievement.

“To Roberto and the Estrella del Norte ” Gerry exclaimed, raising his glass of beer.

We all echoed the sentiment.

Next it was Rodrigo's turn, “ To the Antarctic Convergence and the Gulf Stream”.

Admittedly there was a little thinking to be done on that one before the sentiment was echoed in the proper manner once more.

Then Ton piped up, “And to Bimbos and Hobnobs!”

“To Bimbos and Hobnobs!” we all cheered.

I did not want to be left out, and luckily I had been left with the obvious, “ To Sabine's gulls!” I rallied, and we all raised our glasses to our lips one more time.