

## SIGHTING OF A BLACK-BROWED ALBATROSS

Richard R. Veit, Milton

On September 16, 1973, I was a passenger aboard the Brant Point, running between Nantucket, Massachusetts and Hyannis. From the night of the 14th into the night of the 15th, there had been a northeasterly storm, with high winds and periods of rain. A brief clearing occurred on the night of the 15th, after which the wind went to the northwest where it stayed through the 16th, reaching a force of 20-30 m.p.h. and raising a heavy swell out of Nantucket Sound.

The boat left Nantucket Harbor on the 16th at 3:50 p.m. At approximately 4:10 p.m., I began to notice Greater Shearwaters (Puffinus gravis) flying north to south about a half mile to the east of the boat. Greater Shearwaters are rare to uncommon in the sound, as most stay well out to sea. A few of the 35 to 40 individuals came quite close.

At 4:30 p.m., a very large bird with a tremendous wingspan crossed the bow, flew by at a distance of 50 feet, and then followed alongside for 10 minutes, giving me excellent views with 10-power binoculars.

The body of the bird was mainly white. The entire upper surface of the wings, including the back, was dark or black. The rump and lower back were white, in contrast to the short black tail. Its head was also white, with a black mark through the eye and with some grayish marks toward the nape. The bill was very large, heavy, and hooked at the tip; it was yellow throughout (I would say similar in hue to that of an adult Herring Gull or Great Black-backed). As the bird wheeled (banked) with its underside toward me, I could see the under surface of the wings, which were heavily edged with black; a small patch in the center was grayish or slightly mottled, but not white.

Although size can be deceptive over the ocean, I feel that the bird overwhelmed the shearwaters and even the Great Black-backed Gulls which were present. I would also judge the wingspan to be considerably greater than a Gannet's. The body of the bird was very chunky (heavy-set); along with the huge bill, the bird had a very bull-headed appearance. It flew very much like a shearwater, with few flaps and long periods of gliding and banking.

There are two relatively common, large oceanic species which fit parts of this description: Great Black-backed Gull and Gannet. I am convinced that the gull can be eliminated quickly by my bird's tremendous size and wingspan, its massive hooked bill, and its shearwater-like flight.

I am familiar with plumage variations in sub-adult Gannets, which can possess dark mantles. However, Gannets have long pointed tails; this bird's tail was short and definitely rounded. Gannets have rather thin, tapering, pointed bills; this bird had a distinctive heavy hooked bill. Gannets are relatively slim-bodied; this bird was very heavy-set.

Therefore, I am convinced that I saw an albatross.

But was it a Black-browed Albatross (Diomedea melanophris) or a Yellow-nosed Albatross (D. chlororhynchos)? I have since examined skins at the American Museum of Natural History and have studied the literature. The entirely yellow bill would eliminate the Yellow-nosed Albatross, which in the adult has only a thin yellow ridge along the top; the immature has an entirely black bill. The adult Black-browed Albatross has a fair amount of white on the underwing, so my bird could not be an adult.

In Turbott's Birds of New Zealand, he describes the immature Black-browed as having the dusky and gray underwings that I observed, which are not present in the Yellow-nosed. W. B. Alexander in Birds of the Ocean claims that while the Black-browed is still young, the bill becomes yellow, while the head turns from gray to white. I would assume, therefore, that my bird was a sub-adult Black-browed Albatross -- still possessing remains of the immature plumage, yet old enough for the bill and head to have assumed their essentially adult characteristics.

The only other white-bodied, dark-backed albatross with Atlantic distribution is the Shy or White-capped (D. cauta), whose probability in these waters is very remote. It, too, has a considerable amount of white on the underwings in all plumages.

In retrospect, evidence is mounting that the Black-browed Albatross is an occasional visitor to the western North Atlantic. Yet, it is indeterminate whether recent sightings indicate a range extension of this species or a reflection of vastly growing interest and familiarity with pelagic birds.

During the last century, the Black-browed Albatross has been observed or collected in the eastern North Atlantic on 25 or more occasions. One individual spent the "summers" of 1860-94 with a Gannet colony in the Faeroes north of Britain and apparently associated with the Gannets throughout the year (see R. C. Murphy, Oceanic Birds of South America, page 511).

Aside from a bird collected off the west coast of Greenland in August, 1935 (which justifies this species' inclusion in the A.O.U. Check-list), the Black-browed Albatross has recently been reported several times in the western North Atlantic:

June 28, 1972: Off Bird Island, Massachusetts, two birds, the first United States sighting (American Birds, October, 1972, 832).

August 19, 1972: South of Morehead City, North Carolina, two birds (American Birds, August, 1973, 739).

Summer of 1972: Four other sightings of albatrosslike birds. July 13, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; mid-July, two birds 100 miles east of Manasquan Inlet, New Jersey (questionable); early August, two birds 45 miles east-southeast of Manasquan (questionable); August 19, between Bar Harbor, Maine, and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. (American Birds, August, 1973, 740).

July 5, 1973: An adult Black-browed Albatross was reported off Brielle, New Jersey; the lone observer unsuccessfully attempted to photograph the bird.

Keith Shackleton and Ted Stokes state in their book, Birds of the Atlantic Ocean, page 27, "All albatrosses are, to a certain extent, wandering birds and some cover enormous mileages. The frequent -- nine within the last seventy years -- suggest that this species wanders well north when not engaged on family matters." The range map in this book confines the Black-browed Albatross to the eastern Atlantic, east of the Azores but up to 50° north latitude.

As defined by W. B. Alexander (Birds of the Ocean, second edition, page 11), the range of this species is "Southern Oceans between 60° S. and the tropic of Capricorn. Breeds on islets off Cape Horn, Staten I., South Georgia, the Falkland Is., Kerguelen, the Auckland Is., Macquarie I., Campbell I., Antipodes I., and Ildefonso I., Chile."

A note of caution should be introduced here. I question, for example, the ability of even the most experienced observer to distinguish the various albatross plumages at distances up to one mile (as reported by Paul G. DuMont in American Birds, August, 1973, 739). In fact, even at the close range at which I saw my bird, the distinguishing field marks (such as bill color) were not conspicuous. Only by careful inspection during a rather extended period (10 minutes) was I sure of the field marks -- especially considering the rarity of the bird!

I hope that potential observers, now aware of the possibility of sighting albatrosses in New England waters, exercise good judgment in identifying these and other unusual birds. There is a large amount of literature concerning plumages of albatrosses, which should be read thoroughly before making an identification of these birds. Only by positive identification will any trends in the range extension of such species (if such exist) become evident.

#### ATTENTION FEEDER USERS!

We must always have the welfare and safety of our birds in mind. There are feeders with a section for suet held behind wire. The idea seems good, but during winter a bird can be blinded when it reaches through the wire to the suet. The eyeball can become frozen by coming in contact with the wire. Plastic wiring or mesh (such as around onions or frozen turkeys) do away with the hazard.

Cardboard frozen-orange-juice cans, filled with a mixture of suet and seed and hung from a branch, make excellent winter feeders for chickadees and other small birds.

Mrs. Alice Littlefield  
Cambridge