



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen

This month's mystery photograph depicts a dark-and-white flying seabird. The rather slender (rather than laterally compressed) bill and the striking dark-and-white contrast between the top of the head and neck and the face and throat indicate that the bird is not a gull. Likewise, the wings and tail are not pointed enough to suggest a tern. Indeed, only the Sooty Tern and the Bridled Tern would appear as dark above as the pictured bird; however, both of those species would exhibit a white forehead, white on the outer tail feathers, and a white belly with white undertail coverts. Although the Black Skimmer is similarly patterned, the absence of the distinctive asymmetrical, bicolored bill of that species, as well as the absence of white trailing edges to the wings, serves to eliminate it as a possibility. The extensively white, unbarred pattern to the underwings, unmarked breast and sides, and somewhat rounded wing shape similarly remove all of the jaegers as possibilities.

Having thus narrowed the field, the reader is only left with several species of alcids and shearwaters as viable possibilities. The combination of bill shape and facial pattern at once eliminates Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, and both Common and Thick-billed murres. Although the Thick-billed Murre in winter is superficially similar to the mystery species, the dark feathering on a winter-plumaged murre's head extends to the base of the bill (see the *At a Glance* photo in the February 1999 issue of *Bird Observer*, Vol. 27, No. 1), not as a sharp demarcation through the eye. Also, Thick-billed Murres in winter are often

extensively dusky on the sides of the throat, or else have a nearly completely dark throat.

With the alcids eliminated as possibilities, the best candidate for the mystery bird's identity is some species of black-and-white shearwater. The smudgy underwing pattern in the pictured shearwater rules out Cory's Shearwater, which has gleaming white wing linings that contrast distinctly with black underwing tips. Similarly, the Greater Shearwater is not a candidate because the mystery shearwater does not exhibit a capped effect created by a pale collar behind the neck, nor does it display a dusky belly patch or have prominent freckling on the axillaries ("wing pits"). This only leaves the two small, black-and-white shearwaters — Manx and Audubon's — as possibilities.

At this point, the choice is reasonably straightforward because of the excellent view provided by the photograph. A careful examination clearly shows that the relatively long tail and vent area are dark. Likewise, the line separating the dark of the cap and the white of the cheek and throat area meet the bill above the gape and actually appear to show the suggestion of some white between the eye and the bill. Also, there is no pale or whitish feathering extending up onto the neck behind the eye, and there is a broad, dark, trailing edge to the underside of the wings, especially beneath the primaries. Collectively, these are features of Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*). The similar Manx Shearwater has a shorter tail with white undertail coverts, a black cap that extends to the base of the lower mandible without giving the pale-faced appearance shown on the pictured bird, cleaner white underwings that are usually less extensively dusky under the primaries, and generally a pale "ear patch" that extends up behind the eye.

The Audubon's Shearwater in the picture was photographed in the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, and is of the subspecies *P. l. subalaris*. As a result, its underwing linings are somewhat more heavily patterned than would be the case on Audubon's Shearwaters likely to be seen off the coast of southern New England. In Massachusetts, Audubon's Shearwaters are regular but very uncommon late summer visitors far offshore in the warm waters at the edge of the continental shelf south of Georges Bank.

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AT A GLANCE

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