

AT A GLANCE

August 2000



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen

Without a doubt, this month's puzzler is a seabird. Unlike certain mystery photos presented this year, this bird is not depicted flying upside down, and it also appears to have a head! Even better, it shows a number of salient features that should assist in the identification process. So what's the problem? Quite simply the problem is the same problem that exists when trying to identify many seabirds in the field – trying to obtain a definitive view, often at a great distance, of a flying bird. At least in this case, the quiz photo provides a reasonable view at relatively close range.

Since the pictured bird is prominently white below, has a massive bill, and appears to be large in size, all of the storm-petrels can be eliminated as identification candidates, including the very rare White-faced Storm-Petrel which, although white below, is much smaller and has a dark-colored bill. The Black-capped Petrel, a Gulf Stream-associated species rarely seen in Massachusetts waters, is white below but has a black cap, white forehead, short dark bill, and a distinct, dark diagonal bar on the leading edge of the underwing. This leaves only the shearwaters and albatrosses as possibilities. Although the Northern Gannet in certain plumages could resemble the pictured seabird in some respects, gannet can easily be eliminated by the blunt, unpointed bill and tail of the mystery bird, as well as by its different underwing pattern.

Since none of the regularly occurring Massachusetts shearwater species have pure white heads, it is fair to assume that the mystery seabird is not a shearwater unless it is aberrantly plumaged in some way. Further confirmation comes from the absence of

conspicuous “tubes” (i.e., tubular nostrils associated with olfaction and salt glands located in front of the eyes) on the upper mandible of the bill – a hallmark of all the shearwater and gadfly petrel species. This eliminates all but some species of albatross as a possibility.

However improbable it may seem, at least two species of albatross have been definitively recorded in the North Atlantic Ocean, as well as in Massachusetts waters. Both recorded species, the Yellow-nosed Albatross and the Black-browed Albatross, belong to a group of relatively small albatross species collectively called mollymawks. Mollymawks are dark-backed, thus superficially resembling Great Black-backed Gulls, although they are much larger, have more massive bills, have a dark trailing edge to the hind wing instead of white as in a gull, and exhibit a flight behavior more like that of a giant shearwater. In identifying any of the smaller albatrosses, among the features to notice are the pattern of the underwings, the color and pattern of the bill, and the coloration of the head.

With these points in mind, the identification of the albatross in the picture is reasonably straightforward. Of the two mollymawks previously recorded in Massachusetts waters, only the Black-browed Albatross has a prominently light-colored bill. Furthermore, this species is distinctive in having a broad, dark leading edge to the underwing and a fairly wide trailing edge as well. Together these wide, dark margins render the underwings less extensively white than in other similar sized species. By comparison, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses exhibit dark (blackish) bills at any distance, with adult individuals possessing a yellow ridge on the top of the upper mandible. More importantly, this species has a narrow, dark border on the underwings and is smaller and slimmer-winged than the Black-browed Albatross. Although both species possess a dark mark around the eye – a feature hardly visible in the photograph – this marking on the Black-browed Albatross is less triangular in shape than that of the Yellow-nosed Albatross. With this information in hand, the seabird in the photo is quite clearly a Black-browed Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophris*). Careful scrutiny of the photo reveals a thin, dark necklace across the upper chest and a dusky marking near the tip of the bill. These two features indicate that the bird is not fully mature, the maturation process in Black-browed Albatrosses usually taking as much as five to six years. The Black-browed Albatross in the mystery photo was photographed in the Scotia Sea south of the Falkland Islands.

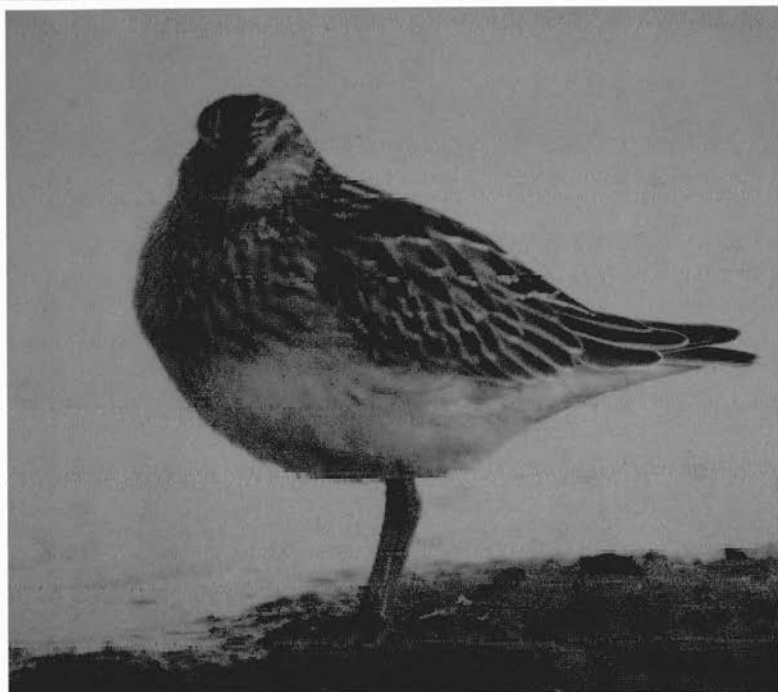
The Black-browed Albatross is a rare vagrant in Massachusetts waters with approximately six satisfactory sight reports on record, all of which have occurred in summer or early fall. 🐦

Wayne R. Petersen



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Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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