

PELAGIC BIRDING FOR LANDLUBBERS

by Wayne R. Petersen, Abington

In an issue devoted to pelagic birds, it seems appropriate to include some comments on pelagic birding from land. Realistically, most birders are likely to spend considerably more time observing pelagics from land than from the deck of a sea-bound vessel. The inherent difficulties involved in taking a lengthy sea trip, both in terms of expense and potential discomfort, are considerable. This need not discourage the landlubber, however, since here in southern New England we are geographically blessed not only with a coastline favoring pelagic bird observation, but also weather patterns which are conducive to making pelagic observations from shore.

A number of variables effect the success of one's efforts to observe pelagic birds from shore. These include the species being observed, the weather conditions preceding and during observation, the time of year, the point of observation and the skill and patience of the observer. All of these are intimately related; however, each can be elaborated upon separately.

Perhaps most important at the outset is to define what are considered to be typical Massachusetts pelagic birds. Essentially, the remarks which follow will refer to those birds which are primarily confined to the offshore fishing grounds and waters generally out of sight of land. Obviously, many gulls and occasionally terns are seen well out of sight of land; however, their primary niche includes the littoral waters close to shore. The groups of principal interest to the pelagic birder are thus comprised of the shearwaters (Procellariidae), storm-petrels (Hydrobatidae), phalaropes (Phalaropodidae), jaegers (Stercorariidae) and the Alcids (Alcidae). Most of these groups contain several species which can possibly be observed in Massachusetts waters. Among the shearwaters are Cory's Shearwater (*Puffinus diomedea*), the Greater Shearwater (*P. gravis*), Sooty Shearwater (*P. griseus*) and Manx Shearwater (*P. puffinus*). The closely allied Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) also belongs here. Massachusetts storm-petrels include Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*) and Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*). Of the three species of phalaropes occurring in the Commonwealth, only the Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) and the Northern Phalarope (*Lobipes lobatus*) are considered pelagic in their local distribution. Three jaeger species, the Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*), Parasitic Jaeger (*S. parasiticus*) and Long-tailed Jaeger (*S. longicaudus*), all can occur in Massachusetts waters, as can the rare Skua (*Catharacta skua*). Alcids which appear with varying regularity off Massachusetts include the Razor-bill (*Alca torda*), Common Murre (*Uria aalge*), Thick-billed Murre (*U. lomvia*), Dovekie (*Plautus alle*), Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle*) and the Common Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*). To this whole category should be added the rare Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*), a species whose appearance in Massachusetts is largely pelagic.

While the identification of these various species is outside the domain of this article, the interested reader is urged to carefully memorize the key field marks and points of separation for each, since many pelagic species are easily confused or misidentified. Only lots of field experience can reinforce published and pictorial descriptions, a criterion difficult to meet for birds as challenging to study and observe as the pelagics. Many pelagic identifications from shore are best made as tentative, the specific species identity often being unable to be ascertained.

Weather, perhaps as much as any other factor, can determine one's success in observing pelagic birds. Common sense suggests that for birds favoring the open ocean, only violent conditions at sea or prolonged fog are likely to force them near enough to land to be seen from the beaches. Being birds which exhibit a variety of ecological feeding adaptations, some knowledge of the more typical variations can prove helpful in explaining the occasional appearance of pelagics inshore during certain unique environmental circumstances. The Procellariids, or Tubenoses, as a group are gliding birds whose search for food is accomplished by scaling over the waves while looking for fish and large planktonic organisms near the surface. Storm-petrels, while also plankton feeders, employ a skimming, hovering or fluttering feeding strategy. Phalaropes typically take minute invertebrates from floating masses of seaweed or directly from the sea's surface. These items they obtain by swimming and dabbing with their bills. The jaegers typically parasitize other seabirds, like terns and gulls, for their hard-won prey. This approach often provides some of the finest aerial maneuvering to be seen in the bird world. Alcids feed on marine fish and invertebrates which they obtain by diving from the surface of the water, often to great depths.

By keeping these feeding strategies in mind, it can be seen that different factors may explain the appearance of pelagics inshore. Shearwaters, which depend on wind for most successful aerial travel, often are deflected shoreward by stiff onshore breezes, especially if prolonged and accompanied by fog. Storm-petrels, phalaropes and Alcids like the Dovekie, which are heavily dependent on small plankton for food, often appear close to shore in numbers when heavy, open-ocean turbulence forces surface plankton to unobtainable depths for the feeding birds. They are also very prone to migratory deflection by heavy onshore winds. Jaegers, being somewhat dependent on other fishing birds for food, occasionally can be located by systematically observing large feeding flocks of terns. Jaegers also seem to appear rather consistently when heavy fog prevails for long periods of time.

Regardless of the precise reasons governing the appearance of pelagic birds near shore, there are conditions which generally are optimum for observation. Any strong onshore wind, especially if it reaches gale force, is excellent. The direction of an onshore wind can obviously vary with the point of observation; however, in most Massachusetts coastal areas winds from the Northeast, East or Southeast are most productive. An exception would occasionally be a strong southwesterly wind which can blow pelagics into lower Buzzards Bay. Ideally, a dry wind, free from accompanying rain, is best. Rain merely impairs observation but seems to have little affect on pelagic bird movement. Fog, when a mile or two off the beach, will often cause pelagics to work the clear waters on the shoreward side of the bank, thus allowing distant observations to be made, especially of shearwaters. For best results it is advisable to be afield during a storm; however, the early morning following the clearing of a storm during the previous night can be equally productive at certain locations.

The best points of observation from which to look for pelagic birds are generally those which afford some elevation, and preferably shelter, and which give a good panorama of either open ocean or a similar large body of water, such as Cape Cod Bay or Nantucket Sound. The closer to the shore the point of observation the better, but try to avoid direct beach-level viewing, since salt spray and ocean haze can provide no end of difficulty. Fortunately, some of the most popular Massachusetts pelagic observation areas make it possible to observe from the comfort of one's automobile. As a rule, most of the best pelagic watching occurs early in the morning, before 9:00 A.M., or late in the afternoon; however, this can vary with existing weather conditions. Tide is a factor at some observation points since at low tide the water line may be a mile or more away from the observer, thus making high or rising tides better for viewing.

It should be pointed out that in addition to storm viewing, successful observations of certain pelagics can be made from locations where working fishing draggers or returning fishing fleets can be observed. Satisfactory looks at Greater and Sooty Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrels can often be obtained by telescoping the wake of commercial fishing boats as they haul or clean their catch on their way to port. Look for boats with large swarms of gulls.

Season is another critical factor influencing the likelihood of making successful pelagic observations. In the spring, beginning in mid-April and extending into mid-May, fog and strong southeasterly winds can occasionally generate inshore flights of phalaropes, typically Red Phalaropes early in the season and then Northern Phalaropes later on. The stray Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater or jaeger can also show up in the first part of May. From late May on, there is a subtly changing schedule of possible pelagics which can be viewed from land. Memorial Day traditionally marks the spring arrival of the Sooty Shearwater and Wilson's Storm-Petrel from the Southern Hemisphere, which are joined several weeks later by Greater Shearwaters working their way northward for a summer in the North Atlantic. These three species reach peak numbers offshore from mid-July to late August. By early August, the vanguard of the phalarope and jaeger migrations are appearing. Jaegers, however, may often be seen earlier since apparently non-breeders are not uncommon in summer off Massachusetts. By late August and continuing into mid-November, pelagic birding gets progressively more exciting. Each fall, coastal line storms and raging Northeasters hit the Massachusetts coast with regularity. Depending upon their exact track, they can be the ultimate boon to the landlubber pelagic watcher. Their affect is to deflect migrating pelagics toward the shore, much the way southward-bound songbirds are forced to the coast by northwesterly winds in September. During these storms in September and October, Northern Fulmars, shearwaters, Leach's Storm-Petrels, and Red Phalaropes, jaegers, and Sabine's Gulls are all possible. Alcids are most prevalent during the first half of November. It should be emphasized that all of these dates are approximate only and that persistent observation may reveal considerably expanded periods for certain species.

The actual technique of watching for pelagic birds can be a grueling and frustrating exercise. First, it often requires a distant, early morning drive in inclement weather to reach the location of an observation point from which to look for pelagics. Second, pelagic watching often means prolonged exposure to the wildest of weather, including cold. And finally, pelagic birding from land requires intense concentration and skill with a telescope. Unlike landbirding where you can run in pursuit of a flitting bird, a passing pelagic is usually a single-shot performance--once gone it is gone forever! Thus, it is important to constantly scan the sea with telescope and binoculars. The quadrants to watch include the horizon for banking shearwaters, the wave troughs for storm-petrels, phalaropes and Alcids, and fairly high in the sky for the strong-flying jaegers. Practice will allow you to look first with the telescope in the direction that most birds are approaching from, then periodically with binoculars to avoid missing close or high-flying birds. In any case, only continued vigilance will prevent you from over-looking species passing quickly by well away from the beach or low in the wave troughs. These techniques, along with lots of patience, can often make the difference between an exciting few hours of birding as compared to a scenic view of a storm-tossed sea.

While these comments are in no way the last word on pelagic birding from shore, they hopefully will give the landlubber some ideas on how to add pelagic bird species to his list without going to sea. In conclusion, several of the better pelagic bird observation localities on the Massachusetts coast are described.

ANDREW'S POINT, ROCKPORT:

An outstanding locality for November Alcid flights, with other species possible depending upon the severity of the storm. Also the best spot in Essex County to see shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrels from land during the summer.

MANOMET POINT, PLYMOUTH:

The South Shore's best pelagic observation spot. Wilson's Storm-Petrels are likely any day in summer, while the Leach's Storm-Petrel is regular in October and early November with a strong NE wind. Jaegers, shearwaters, and Alcids are quite dependable with strong NE winds from September to mid-November, but seldom in the numbers seen at Barnstable or Eastham.

SANDY NECK PARKING LOT, BARNSTABLE:

One of the two best areas on Cape Cod. Excellent chance for all species, depending upon season, but best from September through November. Wind must be strong NE to be really good. If winds shift to NW while at Sandy Neck, go at once to First Encounter Beach in Eastham.

Birds at this location are often seen closer to the observer than at many of the other key localities in Massachusetts. Early morning is best.

LOWER PARKING LOT AT FIRST ENCOUNTER BEACH, EASTHAM:

Perhaps generally the best pelagic locality on the Massachusetts mainland. Usually most productive after a strong Northeaster has blown pelagics into Cape Cod Bay and wind has changed to NW with clearing. The observer must be on hand within an hour after the wind shifts, or at dawn following the clearing of a storm the night before, if he intends to be most successful. High tide is best.

This area has consistently produced both large counts of pelagics and excellent variety in recent years. Species like Manx Shearwater, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Northern Fulmar, Pomarine Jaeger, Skua, Sabine's Gull and Common Puffin have all been recorded with varying regularity.

RACE POINT, PROVINCETOWN:

An area worth checking at all pelagic seasons when there is a stiff NE or E wind. Fishing boats often have shearwaters and storm-petrels in attendance in summer and the Northern Fulmar has been seen from the beach in fall.

NORTH BEACH, ORLEANS TO CHATHAM:

A fine area but one requiring a beach vehicle or boat from Chatham. Best in late summer

and fall with any stiff winds from the East. Shearwaters and storm-petrels regularly follow the Chatham fishing fleet to the tip of North Beach in the summer, and Alcids can be prevalent in November and December.

GOOSEBERRY NECK, WESTPORT:

A good observation point for lower Buzzards Bay, best on strong SW or SE winds. Has produced phalarope wrecks in the spring and shearwaters in fall. A good spot to watch for Cory's Shearwater.

NANTUCKET, MARTHA'S VINEYARD AND THE ISLANDS:

All of these areas are potentially the best pelagic spots in Massachusetts under the correct conditions, but accessibility makes them difficult to take advantage of for most observers.



Wilson's Storm Petrel, photograph by Allen Morgan, Massachusetts Audubon Society



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