

Maryland Pelagic Records from the Royal Navy Birdwatching Society

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Abstract: This paper details the process used and the results of one of several Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) historical canvass research tasks. For this task, the pelagic observational database of the Royal Navy Bird Watching Society (RNBWS) was data-mined to reveal any historical Maryland pelagic bird reports. Two previously unknown observation records that satisfied MD/DCRC review criteria were identified and several errors in the RNBWS database were identified and corrected.

The Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee

The Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) is a standing committee of the Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS). The committee is chartered by the MOS (2014), as follows:

“The primary duty of the Records Committee is to review reports of rare bird sightings in Maryland and the District of Columbia. The Committee shall establish procedures for the submission of reports; publish a list of reviewable species; publish a summary of its work periodically in [*The Maryland Yellowthroat* and *Maryland Birdlife*]; and maintain an official list of the birds of Maryland and the District of Columbia.”

In addition to reviewing contemporaneous rare bird reports, the committee also conducted a comprehensive historical canvass to locate and, if possible, review obscure published reports of rare and unusual regional observations. Obscure reports are those that were either not published in the committee’s baseline, Stewart and Robbins (1958), or were otherwise unknown to the committee. The committee’s historical canvass consisted of over twenty individual tasks to investigate various regional bird reporting sources, such as the Bird Banding Laboratory’s database and the Breeding Bird Survey’s database (both at the United States Geological Survey’s Patuxent Wildlife Research Center), as well as other targeted documentation and data searches.

Royal Naval Birdwatching Society

The Royal Naval Birdwatching Society (RNBWS) was established in 1946 to help and encourage members serving in the British Royal Navy, Royal Marines,

and Women's Royal Naval Service in the observation and study of birds at sea (RNBWS 2013a). The RNBWS has since widened its membership to all, regardless of nationality, who share a common interest in birds at sea. Membership includes individuals from the merchant navies of many countries, operators of ocean weather ships, the offshore oil industry, passengers on cruise liners, and yachtsmen. The Society encourages reports from "Seafarers and Mariners at all levels, from the crews of the biggest cruise liner to the owner of the smallest dinghies. (RNBWS 2013a).

Pelagic Records

According to the RNBWS (2013a), "About seven tenths of the world's surface is covered with salt water, which provides the environment for nearly 300 species of seabirds, and across which many more species of land bird[s] travel during their annual migrations." Opportunities to observe and record observations of birds at sea are limited; therefore, all sources of potential pelagic records are valuable.

Maryland Pelagic Boundaries

Maryland's pelagic (open water) zone, for bird records, extends 200 nautical miles (nm [1 nm = 1.15 mi = 1.85 km]) into the Atlantic Ocean. The original Maryland pelagic waters boundary definition was based on a traditional approach of "due east for 200 nm" from the Maryland/Delaware and the Maryland/Virginia boundary points at the Atlantic Ocean. In March 2013, the MD/DCRC (Hafner et al. 2013) redefined Maryland's pelagic boundaries to follow the principle of equidistance (i.e., "nearest point of land"). The revised boundary is now specifically defined as "Due east of the Maryland/Delaware/Atlantic Ocean border and due east of the Maryland/Virginia/Atlantic Ocean border, each for a distance of 3 nautical miles; and then using the principle of equidistance (nearest point of land) from 3 to 200 nautical miles from the Maryland coastline" (MD/DCRC 2017a). This definition is consistent with the modern approach now adopted by most other state records committees and conforms to the popular eBird pelagic observation recording protocol (eBird 2017). This revised boundary definition significantly increased the total area of Maryland's pelagic zone which now encompasses areas previous overseen by other state records committees, notably Virginia.

RNBWS Database

The RNBWS maintains an online database of bird observation reports from onboard ships. The RNBWS world database includes over 35,000 records of both seabird and land bird sightings from most ocean and sea areas around the world (RNBWS 2013a).

In 2002, based on the original Maryland pelagic zone boundaries, I analyzed the RNBWS database to identify any unknown Maryland pelagic observations of

interest. At that time, no Maryland observations were found that met the MD/DCRC “Review List” criteria, i.e., reports for which the committee would conduct a records review if documentation were available. Although not reviewable, an early Middle-Atlantic region pelagic Dovekie (*Alle alle*) record from 11 December 1966 was identified as a relatively southern record of interest. Further investigation revealed that this observation occurred in Virginia waters, according to the 2002 pelagic boundaries in use at that time. However, as of 2013, due to the redefinition of the Maryland pelagic boundaries, this record reverted to Maryland waters.

In 2013, I again researched Maryland RNBWS observations based on the newly adopted MD/DCRC Maryland pelagic zone boundaries. This 2013 task was now easier to perform by use of the RNBWS’ new, online, web-accessible data portal (RNBWS 2013b). Using this portal, I re-canvassed the RNBWS database for all Maryland pelagic observations with the intent of identifying any MD/DCRC “reviewable” reports. This paper summarizes the steps taken to conduct the 2013 RNBWS database review and to analyze potential Maryland pelagic records.

METHODS

In October 2013, I accessed the RNBWS database via their web portal (RNBWS 2013b). The RNBWS database was searchable either (1) by species or (2) for all reports within a specified radius from a given position. I selected the second method and estimated a geographic center point and radius that would entirely encompass the revised Maryland pelagic zone and show all records therein. My selected search circle was centered at 37.69° N, 73.24° W, with a radius of 201 km (125 mi).

I used the RNBWS web interface to generate an output map that showed all RNBWS pelagic observational reports within that circle, ensuring that all observations from within the revised Maryland pelagic boundaries were included. The output map generated is shown in Figure 1. RNBWS output maps tagged single observations (of one species at a given position) with “SE” and multiple observations (of multiple species from the same position) with “MU.” The output map indicated all single and multiple Maryland pelagic reports (as well as reports from outside jurisdictions that also fell within the search circle). I annotated the map in red with the approximate revised Maryland pelagic boundaries.

I next verified that each record’s reported position was indeed located in Maryland waters rather than that of another state, such as Virginia or New Jersey. This step was especially critical for observations that appeared close to the Maryland pelagic boundary. I plotted each observation’s latitude/longitude using the Department of Natural Resources Maryland Coastal Atlas mapping

tool (MDNR 2016). This step visually verified that each targeted observation was located within the Maryland Federal Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) boundaries (i.e., the revised Maryland pelagic boundaries) and I eliminated from the summary data any candidate observations that fell within other states' OCS jurisdictions.

To create a common description frame of reference, I used Google Earth to mark the latitude/longitude at the middle of the entrance to the Ocean City (Maryland) Inlet and used this location as a reference point for informally describing each valid Maryland RNBWS observation. I determined the distance and bearing from this Ocean City point to each observation by using the "GPS Visualizer's coordinate calculators & distance tools" (Schneider 2003–2016).

A total of 23 Maryland species/location observations resulted, including both single and multiple reports. On the output map, I annotated these observations in red from 01 to 23 to facilitate internal tracking, discussion, and analysis.

Using the RNBWS data portal, I next examined the details of each relevant RNBWS data record. On the output map, a right-click on a specific SE or MU observation icon revealed the species observed and ship name associated with that sighting report. An example of these additional details (for reports 12 and 13) is shown in Figure 2.

The original database analysis described was conducted in 2013. In 2017, while preparing this article, the RNBWS database was again accessed; however, some data element definitions appeared to have been changed. Discussions with the current RNBWS database administrator, Stephen Chapman, revealed that after he took on that role, he discovered some systemic errors with data record, for example, missing data entry minus signs which placed records in the wrong hemisphere or the incorrect use of American and European date formats (e.g., mm/dd/yyyy vs. dd/mm/yyyy, respectively). Chapman analyzed and fixed the database's seabird records; however, the approximately 10,000 land bird records have been pulled and are awaiting what will be a lengthy analysis. Chapman did, however, double check all land bird data records for Maryland waters and confirmed that they are correct (except for the one instance, discussed below).

I next drilled down to specific observation report details by clicking on the indicated species/ship link. As an example, the details of the Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*) observation (observation 12) are shown in Figure 3.

Within this "Full Details" data block, the "Observation ID" is an RNBWS-assigned accession number. The "Association" field is the volume and page number of the associated issue of the *Sea Swallow*, the RNBWS annual journal, where the observation was published. The *Sea Swallow* is published in

November of each year. In this Great Skua example, the citation is *Sea Swallow*, volume 19, page 70 (1967). Each referenced issue was examined to extract the relevant article title and author, and a copy of the article was captured for the MD/DCRC's data repository.

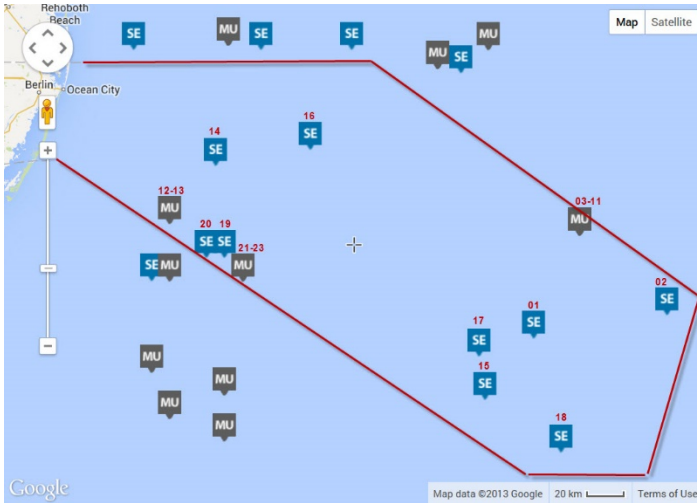


Figure 1. RNBWS database observations within the 2013 revised MD/DCRC Maryland pelagic boundaries (RNBWS 2013b).



Figure 2. Example of an expanded RNBWS database observation 12 and 13 (RNBWS 2013b).

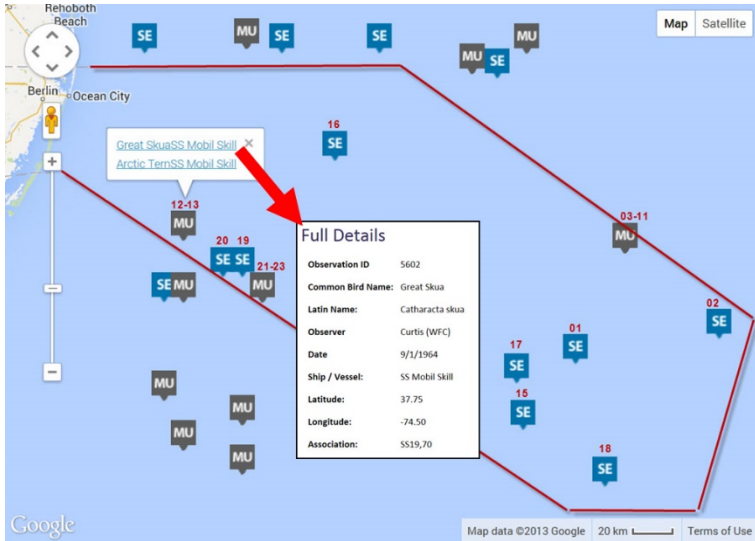


Figure 3. Example of full details of an RNBWS database observation 12 (RNBWS 2013b).

I created a summary table of all Maryland waters’ RNBWS reports, including references to published *Sea Swallow* articles (Table 1). In this table, I annotated, in bold, MD/DCRC “reviewable” reports of interest, i.e., observations that met the then prevailing MD/DCRC Review List criteria (MD/DCRC 2017b). (This review list has evolved over time.) For each reviewable report, I created an MD/DCRC data record with a committee accession number, in the format MD/YYYY-NNN where YYYY is the year of the creation of the data record and NNN is a sequential number.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

All Maryland pelagic records, of both seabirds and land birds, identified in the RNBWS database are summarized, in chronological order, in Table 1. Reports that would have met the prevailing MD/DCRC review criteria are bolded.

One report looked quite “suspicious” and called for special attention. It was a 1962 observation of four Lesser Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea cabaret*) quite far out to sea, which, if valid, would be not only a first Maryland record, but also, as of 2013, a North American first. [Note: In July 2017, the American Ornithological Society added Greenland to its North American geographic scope and thereby, due to an earlier 1933 Greenland specimen record, accepted Lesser Redpoll (now *Acanthis cabaret*) onto its checklist of North American birds

(Chesser et al. 2017).] I contacted representatives of the RNBWS to inquire about the validity of this 1962 Maryland report. The RNBWS database record contacts at the time were:

- Seabirds: Captain Neil Cheshire, MN; diomedea1@bigpond.com
- Land birds: Lieutenant Chris Patrick, Royal Navy; chrispatrick@live.co.uk.

I wrote to Captain Neil Cheshire, with whom I had previously communicated during my 2002 canvass. I asked him in an e-mail (Appendix 1) for any available details of that 1962 observation. Captain Cheshire's reply (Appendix 2) stated that:

“...the record as published [in *Sea Swallow*] is for Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*, so it would appear that whoever entered this record into the database has assigned the sub/species *cabaret* arbitrarily.... This record is from over 50 years ago and a definitive answer is probably lost in the mists of time!”

The RNBWS officials therefore agreed that the Redpoll subspecies (based on British Ornithologists' Union [BOU] taxonomy, at the time) that had been entered into the RNBWS database was likely without basis and therefore could be considered incorrect.

Since this Lesser Redpoll “record” had already been “published” (via the publicly-accessible RNBWS database), I followed MD/DCRC protocol and created an MD/DCRC data record [accession number MD/2013-064] to correspond to this published Lesser Redpoll report. For this report, I captured all relevant documentation and correspondence for our MD/DCRC archives and the historical record. I placed this report into the MD/DCRC “Retracted” category, indicating that a report was “published” but was subsequently withdrawn or recanted. I also created a corresponding MD/DCRC data record (MD/2013-073) to document the corresponding corrected report of “redpoll, species (*Acanthis* species),” in lieu of the erroneously reported Lesser Redpoll. This report, related to the original report, although not reviewable, was still a report of interest and deserved to be captured in the committee's database. I placed the report into the committee's “Non-Review Species” category.

I entered the 01 September 1964 Great Skua and Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) reports into the MD/DCRC database with accession numbers MD/2013-066 and MD/2013-067, respectively. Since no detailed descriptions were located for these published, public-record reports, they were placed in the MD/DCRC “Unreviewable” category which generally indicates reports that were published (and, hence, reviewed by an editor [in this case, Bourne (1967)]), but for which no detailed documentation was either created or subsequently located.

Table 1. Bird records within Maryland’s pelagic boundaries as recorded in the RNBWS database (organized chronologically) (RNBWS 2013b and published references). Reports that would have met the prevailing MD/DCRC review criteria are bolded.

RNBWS Observation ID Number (2013) [Updated Observation ID Number (2017)]	Reference Number	Date	Common Name (Reviewable: bold) [MD/DCRC Accession Number]	Observer	Ship/Vessel	Latitude (degrees)	Longitude (degrees)	Distance (nautical miles) from Ocean City, MD	Bearing (degrees) from Ocean City, MD	Sea Swallow Published Reference	RNBWS Notes
2447	01	15 MAY 1960	Evening Grosbeak	JO Brinkley	SS <i>Hinea</i>	37.25	-72.50	139	117	Tuck 1961	1; E of Norfolk, VA
3673	02	24 JAN 1962	Lesser Redpoll [MD/2013-064]; Redpoll, species [MD/2013-073]	ME Jones	MV Overseas Courier	37.35	-71.77	168	109	Tuck 1964	4; on board at close range 250 mi E of Norfolk, VA; departed N
3825	03	13 APR 1962	Eastern Meadowlark	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1; on board all day
3826	04	13 APR 1962	Eastern Towhee	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	2; on board at close range
3827	05	13 APR 1962	Ovenbird	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1; ringed as A256
3828	06	13 APR 1962	Slate-colored Junco	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1
3829	07	13 APR 1962	Snowy Egret	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1; on board
3830	08	13 APR 1962	Song Sparrow	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	5; on board all day
3831	09	13 APR 1962	White-throated Sparrow	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1; ringed as A255
3832	10	13 APR 1962	Wood Thrush	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Tuck 1964	1
3833 [2761]	11	13 APR 1962	Wilson’s Storm-Petrel	ME Jones	<i>MV Overseas Courier</i>	37.70	-72.25	140	105	Jones 1964	~75; following ship; first of year
5602 [4013]	12	01 SEP 1964	Great Skua [MD/2013-066]	WF Curtis	SS Mobil Skill	37.75	-74.50	44	141	Bourne 1967	[1 ?]
5602 [4014]	13	01 SEP 1964	Arctic Tern [MD/2013-067]	WF Curtis	SS Mobil Skill	37.75	-74.50	44	141	Bourne 1967	5
7014 [5127]	14	12 NOV 1966	Little Auk [Dovekie] [MD/ 2002-028]	PWG Chilman	SS <i>Plagiola</i>	38.00	-74.25	44	116	Bourne and Dixon 1973	31; S of New York; southernmost of year

RNBWS Observation ID Number (2013) [Updated Observation ID Number (2017)]	Reference Number	Date	Common Name (Reviewable: bold) [MD/DCRC Accession Number]	Observer	Ship/Vessel	Latitude (degrees)	Longitude (degrees)	Distance (nautical miles) from Ocean City, MD	Bearing (degrees) from Ocean City, MD	Sea Swallow Published Reference	RNBWS Notes
8069	15	22 MAY 1968	Great Blue Heron*	PWG Chilman	SS <i>Vibex</i>	36.98	-72.77	136	126	Tuck 1971	1; departed NNW; [300 nm E of South Carolina*]
13645	16	12 OCT 1978	Grey Plover [Black-bellied Plover]	W Weitkowitz	MV <i>Columbus California</i>	38.07	-73.73	66	103	Casement 1980	1; settled for a few hours; 65 nm SE of Delaware Bay
15848 [9948]	17	24 JUN 1982	Wilson's Storm-Petrel	PWG Chilman	MV <i>Tricula</i>	36.75	-72.35	161	125	Chapman 1984	5; astern
15849 [9949]	18	30 JUN 1982	Wilson's Storm-Petrel	PWG Chilman	MV <i>Tricula</i>	37.17	-72.80	129	122	Chapman 1984	At least 20; here on the return passage
22121	19	13 MAY 1990	Barn Swallow	MC Littlewood	MT <i>London Spirit</i>	37.60	-74.20	60	136	Casement 1991	1; 64 nm ESE Chincoteague
22903	20	24 MAR 1991	Northern Flicker	MC Littlewood	MT <i>London Spirit</i>	37.60	-74.30	57	139	Casement 1992	2; 1030 hrs, 55 nm off Chincoteague; stayed aboard until arrival in New York later in the evening
33283	21	10 OCT 2007	Mourning Dove	S Cook	MV <i>Fram</i>	37.50	-74.10	68	136	Patrick 2011	2; aboard in morning
33284	22	10 OCT 2007	Palm Warbler	S Cook	MV <i>Fram</i>	37.50	-74.10	68	136	Patrick 2011	1; arrived exhausted, remained a few hours, then resumed its migration
33285	{23}**	10 OCT 2007	Peregrine** Falcon	S Cook	MV <i>Fram</i>					Patrick 2011	1; immature visited in afternoon for several hours 52 nm SE of Cape Lookout, NC

*The latitude and longitude listed and the comment of “300 nm E of South Carolina” were in conflict. Plotting the SS *Vibex*'s May 1968 course from Curacao to New York, based on the ship's log, showed that the observation latitude and longitude, placing the ship in Maryland waters, was correct and the comment was erroneous. This conclusion was also confirmed by the current RNBWS database administrator, Stephen Chapman. Chapman noted that the *Sea Swallow* Editor added the comment to Captain Chilman's data to help contextualize the position; however, his comment was incorrect. Therefore, this observation is confirmed to be a Maryland waters record and Chapman has updated the RNBWS database accordingly.

**The RNBWS placement of this sighting in Maryland waters and the comment referencing Cape Lookout appeared to be inconsistent. An analysis of the original bird observation log for this MV *Fram* cruise indicated that the NC (North Carolina) comment seemed correct and the reference to Maryland waters was probably erroneous. Chapman, the current RNBWS database administrator, confirmed this conclusion via plotting the ship's course and he also commented that Captain Simon Cook was a reliable reporter. Therefore, the described Peregrine Falcon position relative to Cape Lookout is deemed to be correct and hence this is not a Maryland waters record.

Great Skua was not included in the MD/DCRC baseline (Stewart and Robbins 1958); however, by the time the MD/DCRC was founded in 1982, the species was recognized as a regular winter visitor to Maryland waters. Great Skua was added to the Official List of the Birds of Maryland in 1995 by a general motion of the MD/DCRC, rather than based on a single first state record. This committee motion recognized the general presence of this taxon, and similarly a few other species, as recognized multiple-observer and photo-documented regular Maryland visitors since Stewart and Robbins (1958). During this interregnum period, even though Great Skua had never been classified as formally a review species, early observations are still notable and all reports have been captured in the committee's database. This 1964 sight report, despite lack of documentation, represents the second report for Maryland.

Similarly, Arctic Tern was not included in the Maryland baseline and this 1964 RNBWS report represents the first sight report for Maryland. Despite numerous other sight reports, Arctic Tern was not accepted as a Maryland species until a 30 May 1992 observation when two birds were photographed at Rocky Gap State Park in Allegany County (Southworth and Southworth 1992; Hall 1992).

SUMMARY

The MD/DCRC historical canvass of the RNBWS database resulted in identification of two hypothetically reviewable pelagic observation reports (Great Skua and Arctic Tern) that were previously unknown to the MD/DCRC. One erroneous RNBWS data entry report (Lesser Redpoll) was identified and corrected for posterity (redpoll, species). Two other questionable land bird position reports (Great Blue Heron [*Ardea herodias*] and Peregrine Falcon [*Falco peregrinus*]) were validated and annotations were corrected, with one of the records (Peregrine Falcon) being removed from Maryland waters. All relevant database and journal information was captured and archived, and appropriate entries were made to the MD/DCRC database.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my appreciation to Captain Neil Cheshire, MN, and Lieutenant Christopher Patrick (both RNBWS) for their assistance in conducting my 2002 query and my 2013 analysis of the RNBWS database. For the 2017–2018 database analysis and resolving issues, I also thank David Dobson, *Sea Swallow* Editor, and especially Stephen Chapman, RNBWS database administrator.

Thanks are also extended to reviewer Glenn D. Therres (Associate Director, Wildlife and Heritage Service, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Annapolis, MD) and an anonymous reviewer.

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APPENDIX 1

From: Phil Davis
To: Capt Neil Cheshire MN
Sent: Friday, September 13, 2013
Subject: RNBWS database information query

Phil Davis here. I am the Secretary of the Maryland/District of Columbia [USA] Records Committee. I had previously communicated with you, a number of years ago, on several pelagic records research projects.

Currently, I am working on an historical canvass of “reviewable” records for Maryland and the District of Columbia.

Recently, our committee revised Maryland’s pelagic boundaries to adopt the more generally accepted principle of equidistance (aka, “closest point of land”). The effect of this change was to shift and increase the Atlantic Ocean area that we now consider belonging to Maryland, from a records standpoint.

Yesterday, I saw a posting on the Seabirds listserver announcing your new checklist, which I downloaded ... thank you! While I was on the RNBWS web site, I also saw the link to the worldwide RNBWS database and found that the database is now available online.

I have a request for related information:

Lesser Redpoll. I searched for records that now fall within the new Maryland pelagic boundaries and, besides several reviewable records (of Great Skuas), I also found a record of a 1962 Lesser Redpoll that was observed in what is now Maryland waters. If valid, that record would be a first for Maryland and a first for North America!!!

The details related to this record that were available to me via the web interface are:

Observation ID: 3673
Common Bird Name: Lesser Redpoll
Latin Name: *Carduelis flammea cabaret*
Species: Fringillidae
Family: PASSERIFORMES
Observer: Jones (MEJ)
Date: 1/24/1962
Ship / Vessel: MV Overseas Courier
Latitude: 37.35
Longitude: -71.77
Association: SS16,51
Notes: On board at close range 250m e coast dN [sic]

I am writing you to ask if any detailed information should happen to exist related to this observation. Any detailed field notes, photographs, or published references would be of great value.

The “Notes” comment appears to be truncated. If the complete note is available, that would be of value, also.

I realized that redpoll taxonomy is a bit unsettled, especially on the opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean; however, if this bird were actually a [BOU] Lesser Redpoll (*Carduelis cabaret*), rather than an [AOU] Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) or a Hoary Redpoll (*A. hornemanni*), this would be a highly significant record.

Again, any additional information you can provide related to this observation would be greatly appreciated.

Phil Davis, Secretary
MD/DC Records Committee
2549 Vale Court
Davidsonville, Maryland 21035 USA

APPENDIX 2

From: Neil Cheshire <diomedea1@bigpond.com>
To: Phil Davis <pdavis@ix.netcom.com>
Cc: Chris Patrick <chrispatrick@talktalk.net>, Mark Cutts <slashercutts@lycos.com>
Subject: Re: RNBWS database information query
Date: Sat, 14 Sep 2013

Hello Phil,
Thanks for your email. Re. your queries, I attached the relevant pages from *Sea Swallow* Vols.16 and 20.

Lesser Redpoll *Carduelis flammea cabaret* 24 Jan '62. You will note the record as published is for Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*, so it would appear that whoever entered this record into the database has assigned the sub/species *cabaret* arbitrarily. Capt. Tuck who collated the landbird at sea reports for *Sea Swallow* 16 and 20 has long been deceased. This record is from over 50 years ago and a definitive answer is probably lost in the mists of time!

I have copied this email to our current landbird at sea record coordinator, Chris Patrick and our webmaster Mark Cutts in case they have any additional information.

Neil Cheshire
Encounter Bay,
South Australia