

First Sightings of Wilson's Storm-Petrel on the
Mississippi Gulf Coast

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On 15 August 1985 at 0915 King saw a Wilson's Storm-Petrel (Oceanites oceanicus) in Gulfport, Harrison County, Mississippi. Minimal Hurricane Danny was crossing the Louisiana coast, causing severe weather: strong southerly winds, rain, and low clouds. Observations were made through 7 x 35 binoculars for about four minutes.

The swallow-sized bird fed in the troughs of waves, pattering up one wave face into the trough of the next. It was brownish-black, with a white U-shaped rump-patch extending to the undertail coverts. The wings showed little bend at the carpal-joint, with rounded tips and straight trailing edges. The tail was squarish. Pale carpal bars were not noted, nor was the yellow webbing between the toes. Flight was steady except when feeding, when it raised its wings straight up.

Another Wilson's Storm-Petrel was seen by Toups and Hodges on 29 October 1985 along the Gulfport beach in virtually the same location as the King sighting. The bird was seen as close as 4 m through 7 x 35 binoculars for about 15 seconds. Skies were heavily overcast, a light rain was falling, and strong winds were blowing out of the south-southeast. This time, Hurricane Juan was hanging off the Louisiana coast.

The bird was very small--Toups likened it to a Purple Martin (Progne subis) in size--with rounded head, short bill, and plump body. It was entirely black, but for a prominent square white patch on the rump and uppertail coverts, which extended slightly down onto the flanks and undertail coverts. No paleness was seen on the upperwings, nor was the amount of

bend in the wings noted. Although some rectrices were missing, the tail was rounded when spread.

The bird was first seen pattering on the surface of the water, wings held high over its back, fluttering slightly. Upon our approach, the bird rose and flew closely past, with deep wing-beats, and steady flapping. The bird was swept along rapidly out of sight by the strong winds.

If feeding behavior is diagnostic, both Leach's (Oceanodroma leucorhoa) and Band-rumped (O. castro) storm-petrels can be eliminated on this aspect alone. Leach's can also be ruled out by the observation of square, not triangular, rump-patches, squared or rounded rather than forked tails, and flight, which was steady, rather than erratic. Band-rumped can also be eliminated by the small size of the birds, large white rump-patches, and deep wing-beats, unlike the reported shallow wing-beats of the Band-rumped Storm-Petrel.

Toups and Hodges have extensive experience with this species off New England. Toups has also seen Leach's there, and Hodges has seen Black (O. melania) and Least (O. microsoma) storm-petrels in the Pacific Ocean.

These are the first sightings of this species along the Mississippi coast, and the second and third records for the state. There was an apparently unpublished sight record of a Wilson's Storm-Petrel from an unknown locality in Mississippi, which placed the species on the state list as hypothetically occurring here; the species began appearing on state checklists in 1980, so the sighting occurred sometime before that.

E.B. Hoover (1970) saw six "Leach's Petrels" on 25 July 1970 on Pelahatchie Lake, Rankin County, which were probably blown inland by Tropical Storm Becky. Although the published description convinces us that the birds were storm-petrels, it does not rule out Wilson's Storm-Petrel which, is more likely to have occurred (Duncan and Havard 1980).

Literature Cited

- Duncan, C.D. and R.W. Havard. 1980. Pelagic birds of the northern Gulf of Mexico. *Am. Birds* 34:122-132.
- Hoover, E.V. 1970. Observation on Leach's Petrel. *M.O.S. Newsletter* 16:4-5.