

Vagrant Albatrosses in the Western North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico

by James W. McDaniel*



Is the recent increase in sight records real or factitious? A consideration and review.

Yellow-nosed Albatross, Holly Beach, La., May 9, 1970. Photo/James W. McDaniel.

No less than six albatrosses from two species—Black-browed (*Diomedea melanophris*) and Yellow-nosed (*D. chlororhynchos*)—were reported in the 1972 nesting season issue of *American Birds*. Since prior to 1968 only six records were known for North America (Post, 1968), a current review seems appropriate.

The normal range of these two species is the southern oceans above the 40th parallel (Alexander, 1954). The Yellow-nosed is confined to a large extent to the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans while the Black-browed occurs circumpolar. This relative difference in range is reflected in known nesting sites. Murphy (1936) reported Yellow-nosed Albatrosses nesting on Gough Island and the Tristan da Cunha group in the Atlantic and on St. Paul Island in the Indian Ocean. Nesting sites of the Black-browed Albatross include Campbell and the Auckland Islands in the New Zealand area, “Kerguelen and the Prince Edward Islands, South Georgia, the Falklands, Staten Island, and at the Ildefonso and Diego Ramirez Islets, near Cape Horn” (Murphy, 1936, p. 506).

Until most recently, the records of these birds in the North Atlantic have shown a curious pattern: the Black-browed has been reported from Europe and the Yellow-nosed from North America. Bourne (1967) has reviewed the records of Yellow-nosed Albatrosses in Europe and concludes a “probable” occurrence in Iceland about 1844, a “possible” from France in August, 1889, and no confirmation of the species from the British Isles. On the other hand, Bourne reports 6 specimens and an additional 19 sightings for the Black-browed in the eastern Atlantic.

The situation is reversed on the other side of the Atlantic where there are five confirmed occurrences of the Yellow-nosed (specimen or photograph), plus 7 sight records and a record based on a feather. For the Black-browed there is a specimen from Greenland in 1935 and two sight records of two birds each, both from the summer of 1972. Additionally, there is an unidentified albatross sighting, also from summer 1972.

The accompanying list (Table 1) includes all reports of albatrosses from eastern North America. Of these, two records warrant additional comment. The feather found on Jones Beach in 1948 (Nichols, 1950), omitted from the records cited by Post, is a questionable inclusion. R. C. Murphy definitely identified it as coming from the genus *Diomedea*, and on the basis of its small size, “both in breadth of the whole quill and in length and diameter of the shaft”, concluded that it probably came from *D. chlororhynchos*. A second item of question centers around the Machias Seal Island record of 1913 (Murphy, 1936) and the Oxford County, Maine record (Norton, 1934). In addition to reporting the Oxford County bird and referring to the Machias Seal Island record, Norton mentions another albatross seen by “the late Evan D. Rackliff . . . earlier in the summer.” Palmer (1949) correctly attributes this record to 1913 and suggests that it may have been the same bird taken off Machias Seal Island (as does Norton). Post (1968) has treated the item as an additional record and interpreted “earlier in the summer” to mean 1934. In as much as all sources (Norton, 1934; Palmer, 1949; and Post, 1968) have attributed the sighting to Rackliff, who was

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dead in 1934 (personal communication from Dr Watson), it seems best to assume that Norton was referring to 1913, and that this is not an additional record.

Table 1

Records of Yellow-nosed (*Diomedea chlororhynchos*) and Black-browed (*D. melanophris*) Albatrosses in North America.

- 1 *D. chlororhynchos*, specimen taken at the mouth of the Moisie River, Quebec, August 20, 1885 (Murphy, 1936).
- 2 *D. chlororhynchos*, specimen taken off Machias Seal Island, Maine, August 1, 1913 (Murphy, 1936) (thought to be the same bird reported by Rackliff).
- 3 *D. chlororhynchos*, specimen taken in East Freyburg, Oxford County, Maine, mid-July 1934 (Norton, 1934).
- 4 *D. melanophris*, specimen taken at Lille Helleskebanke at 66' N. on the west coast of Greenland, late August, 1935 (Bourne, 1967).
- 5 *D. chlororhynchos*, (?), feather found on Jones Beach, L.I., New York, Nov. 7, 1948 (Nichols, 1950).
- 6 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation off New Smyrna Beach, Florida, July 13, 1958 (*Audubon Field Notes*, 12:406).
- 7 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation off Monhegan Island, Maine, March 21, 1960 (Libby, 1960).
- 8 *D. chlororhynchos*, photographed 2 miles off Jones Beach, L.I., New York, May 29, 1960 (Bull, 1961).
- 9 *D. chlororhynchos*, five birds observed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, August 15, 1961 (*Audubon Field Notes*, 15:13).
- 10 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation off Monhegan Island, Maine, May 12, 1964 (Libby, 1964).
- 11 *D. chlororhynchos*, photographed at Holly Beach, Louisiana, May 9, 1970 (*Audubon Field Notes*).
- 12 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation, Bird Island in Buzzards Bay, Mass., May 7, 1971 (*American Birds*).
- 13 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation, Gardiner's Island, L. I., June 8, 1971 (*Amer. Birds*).
- 14 *D. chlororhynchos*, observation, S. Padre Island Jetties, Texas, May 14, 1972 (*Amer. Birds*).
- 15 *D. melanophris*, observation, off Bird I. Marion, Mass., June 28, 1972, 2 birds (*Amer. Birds*).
- 16 *D. melanophris*, observation of 2 birds off North Carolina, summer 1972 (date?), (*Amer. Birds*).
- 17 *Diomedea* sp., observation, off Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard, Mass., July 2, 1972, (*Amer. Birds*).

In addition to the above comments, something needs to be said about the sight records. Bourne (1967, p. 145) has suggested the following criteria for an acceptable record: "Who first saw the bird, where, when, and how; its subsequent history and fate, as far as they can be traced; how

it was identified, if a specimen, as the bird collected, and as a species; how it was recorded, with details of confirmatory evidence from an independent source, if available; whether the whole story appears circumstantially probable, in view of past and present information on the subject." Of the 17 records included in Table 1, fully 10 are based on sight records alone, and all have occurred since 1958. None of these completely meets Bourne's criteria, although occasionally the observer is cited as having some expertise or experience with albatrosses. One cannot help but speculate on the status of these records ten or twenty years hence.

Related to the concern with sight records is the trend in occurrences of albatrosses over the last 90 or so years. Figures 1 and 2 show the cumulative records of *D. melanophris* and *D. chlororhynchos* for the North Atlantic. This trend is not linear, but is positively accelerated. For both species the bulk of the curve is the result of sight records. In explaining the increasing numbers of albatross records, one has several possible alternatives. The first is the obvious that increasingly more and more albatrosses are entering the northern ocean. If this is to be true and if we accept the hypothesis that these birds are transported northward by cyclonic storms (Murphy, 1936; Bourne, 1967), then there must also be demonstrated a comparable acceleration in the frequency of occurrence of these storms. Quite unlikely, I believe. A second, and far more likely explanation, one suggested by Warham *et al.* (1966), states simply that as the interest in watching birds grows, there will be increases in

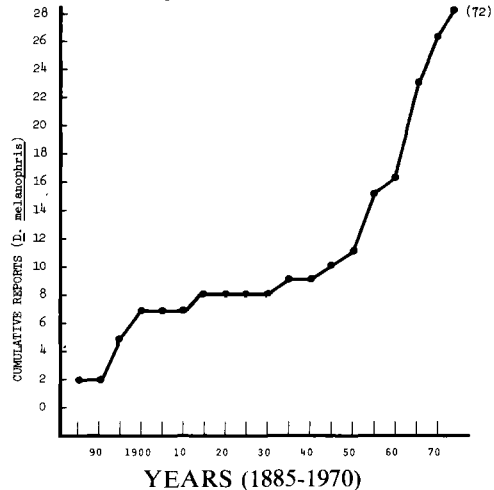


Figure 1. Cumulative reports of Black-browed Albatrosses (*D. melanophris*) in the North Atlantic from 1885 to 1972. Data from Bourne, 1967 and from *American Birds*, 1972.

the reports of rare species. To the extent that we accept this form of explanation we must also consider a third alternative. As more people are in the field watching birds, and as more genuine sightings are made, there may be an increase in the tendency to view an unusually large, or indifferently plumaged gull as a vagrant albatross or as a flock of five albatrosses (AFN, 1961). The above is not meant to dispute the credibility of previous observers, but to point out a problem that arises from an increasing number of people looking at birds. Finally, it may be that there is neither an increase in birds nor in the number of people observing albatrosses. The same increasing trend may be due to decreasing reluctance to admit to seeing an albatross with no accompanying verification.

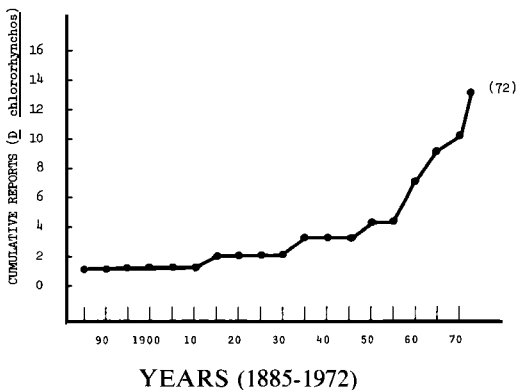


Figure 2. Cumulative reports of Yellow-nosed Albatrosses (*D. chlororhynchos*) in the North Atlantic from 1885 to 1972. See Table 1 for sources.

The problem of validating sight records is not an easy one. Obviously it would not be wise to make collecting permits more widely available, assuming that a birder would even want to collect such a bird as an albatross. Even Murphy (1936, p. 511) laments the collection of a bird reportedly having lived 34 years with a Gannet colony! Another part of the problem stems from the very rarity of some birds; there is no way to "practice" identification. This inherent difficulty is often compounded by the fact that only a cursory examination of a bird can be made. The present writer can attest to the difficulty of identifying an albatross under these conditions. At Holly Beach (AFN, 1970) it was only by driving up the beach road ahead of the albatross repeatedly to watch it flash past that it was possible to examine it at all. Fortunately, there were sufficient beach and road to permit this operation a number of times. Even

then it required careful examination of color photographs by experts (George E. Watson, and R. C. Murphy) to confirm identification.

In conclusion, the available evidence suggests that albatrosses from the southern hemisphere are occurring in the North Atlantic with increasing frequency. Whether this is due to an actual increase in birds or to an increase in birders remains to be seen. If the former, there must be a correlated set of events to support the claim. If the latter, we should continue to see an increase in reports as the number of people interested in birds increases. The problem of acceptance of sight records seems to be without immediate solution. Its final resolution may well rest with a decreasing emphasis on specimens by the professional ornithologist and an increasing commitment to expertise by the non-professional. Certainly the latter is not contingent upon the former. In view of recent sightings, anyone in a position to observe albatrosses and other pelagic birds should definitely become acquainted with some of the excellent literature on identification (e.g. Warham *et al* , 1966; Alexander, 1954; Murphy, 1936).

¹The author wishes to express his sincerest gratitude to Dr. George E. Watson of the U.S. National Museum for his invaluable aid and suggestions in preparation of the manuscript.

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