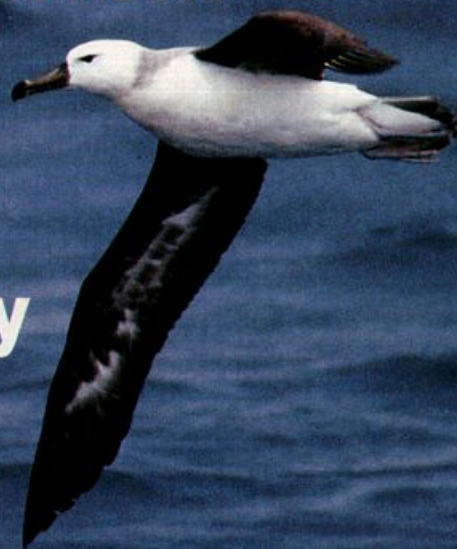


# The Black-browed Albatross in North America:

## First Photographically Documented Record



**Figure 1. Immature Black-browed Albatross at Norfolk Canyon,  $\pm 65$  nmi east of Virginia Beach, 6 February 1999. Note the gray collar, contrasting white head, and black underwings with white secondary coverts. Photograph/J. Brian Patteson**

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The Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* is an enigmatic species in North America. Although there have been "over a dozen reports" of this species off the east coast of Canada and the United States (ABA 1996), all specimen and photographic records of albatrosses have pertained to the Yellow-nosed Albatross *T. chlororhynchos* (McDaniel 1973, Mlodinow 1999). Indeed, although the Black-browed Albatross was accepted to the list of species having occurred in the United States and Canada (ABA 1996), none of the dozen or so reports is substantiated by physical evidence or photographs. Furthermore, the AOU (1998) placed the species on the North American list based on a specimen from Martinique but judged none of the records for the United States and Canada to be satisfactory. Thus, there was some recent discussion of removing the species from the American Birding Association Area list (J. L. Dunn pers. comm.).

Herein we report the first fully documented record of a Black-browed Albatross for the United States and Canada. This bird, an immature, was studied at length and extensively photographed by us

and others on 6 February 1999 at Norfolk Canyon, a locale over the Continental Shelf roughly 65 nautical miles east of Virginia Beach, Virginia. This date saw cold air temperatures (2–10°C), heavy cloud cover, large swells, and wind-sea conditions estimated at Beaufort force 4–6. Other essentially pelagic species observed were four light-morph Northern Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis*, five Manx Shearwaters *Puffinus puffinus*, a single Great Skua *Catharacta skua*, two first-winter Black-legged Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla*, an immature Razorbill *Alca torda*, and three Atlantic Puffins *Fratercula arctica*.

The Black-browed Albatross was first noted at 1230 EST. It remained in view for 20 minutes at distances of 20–100 m. Based on past records for the northwestern Atlantic Ocean, it seemed overwhelmingly likely that the bird would prove to be a Yellow-nosed Albatross; indeed, this species remains the "default" albatross off the East Coast of North America. Even so, after a few minutes of careful study, it became apparent that it was in fact an immature Black-browed Albatross. It remained in view for at least another 10 minutes after the identification was made, so all field marks could be rechecked on the bird with it still in view. An extensive set of photographs and a videotape were obtained in this time (Figs. 1–4).

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE VIRGINIA BIRD**

The following description is based on contemporaneous field notes and photographs of the bird. This bird was truly huge, long-winged, and impressive. Obviously no other albatrosses were present for direct size comparison, but relative to other Northern Hemisphere

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**Figure 2.** Immature Black-browed Albatross at Norfolk Canyon,  $\pm 65$  nmi east of Virginia Beach, 6 February 1999. Note the typical mollymawk pattern (dark brown mantle with pale head and underparts), pinkish base to the bill, extensive gray nuchal collar, and clean white rump. Photograph/J. Brian Patteson



**Figure 3.** Immature Black-browed Albatross at Norfolk Canyon,  $\pm 65$  nmi east of Virginia Beach, 6 February 1999. Note the extensively black underwings, with whitish bases to the greater secondary coverts, and the narrow gray breast band. Photograph/J. Brian Patteson

species with which the authors are familiar this bird seemed to be roughly the same size or slightly larger than a Black-footed *Phoebastria nigripes* or a Laysan *P. immutabilis* albatross, with broader wings and a heavier body. Length from bill tip to tail tip did not appear appreciably longer than the many nearby Northern Gannets *Morus bassanus*, but the much greater wingspan and wing area and overall robust appearance of the head, bill, and body made the bird appear appreciably larger than the gannets.

The bill appeared to be all black in most lights, but in better light and at close range it was evident that it was dark pinkish-gray throughout, with only the unguis being jet black. This black tip was fairly clean-cut from the pinkish-gray base (Figs. 1, 2). The legs and feet were grayish (perhaps with some pink as well). Its feet did not extend beyond the tip of the tail (Figs. 1–3). It flew on long, bowed wings with deep wingbeats alternating with long glides. It did not raise the level of its wings much above the horizontal on the upstroke, but often banked dramatically, forming a near-perfect vertical with the ocean surface when doing so. It pattered along the surface of the water for a short distance when taking flight. Not surprisingly, it was silent throughout the observation.

This albatross was a typical mollymawk in plumage pattern/coloration: pale head, rump, and underparts and dark brown mantle, upperwings, and tail (Figs. 1–4). There was no distinct pale feathering breaking the monotony of dark brown on the mantle (Fig. 2). The rump was a clean white, lacking a dusky brown extension into it, unlike the rump of most Laysan Albatrosses (Figs. 2, 4). The nape was



**Figure 4.** Immature Black-browed Albatross at Norfolk Canyon,  $\pm 65$  nmi east of Virginia Beach, 6 February 1999. Note the white uppertail coverts and gray nape extending toward the breast in the point. Photograph/J. Brian Patteson

dusky-gray, with a nuchal collar of the same color extending down the sides of the neck to form a narrow breast band (Figs. 1, 2, 4). A smoky-black smudge around the dark eye extended posteriorly to a thin point about halfway to the rear of the auriculars (forming the classic black "brow"; Figs. 2, 3).

The underwings were mostly dark, smudgy brownish-black, with a pale whitish or brownish-white stripe on the greater secondary coverts. In the photographs, the pale pigmentation appears to be mostly at the base of these coverts (Fig. 1). The remiges were blackish, as was most of the leading edge of the underwing. Indeed, aside from the whitish stripe on the secondary coverts the underwings were largely blackish/dark brownish-black (Figs. 1, 3), with only minor deviations from this pattern (e.g., slightly paler axillaries). The whitish on the coverts blurred almost imperceptibly into the wide blackish borders. The tail appeared to be uniformly dark brown, but it was hard to see from below because of the exceptionally long, white undertail coverts (Figs. 1, 3).

#### IDENTIFICATION ISSUES

Amongst the mollymawks, the Shy *T. cauta*, Buller's *T. bulleri*, and Yellow-nosed albatrosses have extensively white underwings at all ages and are thus readily eliminated. The Laysan Albatross has a largely pink bill at all ages and shows much more white on the underwing. Thus, given the extensively black underwings, the choices quickly narrow to either the Black-browed or Gray-headed *T. chrysostoma* albatross. These species are easily distinguished as adults but are strikingly similar as immatures, thus posing a serious identification problem (Marchant and Higgins 1990). So similar are these species that a record of a tideline corpse from Iceland in about 1844 cannot be identified to species, though it is clearly either a Gray-headed or a Black-browed albatross (Bourne 1967, Cramp and Simmons 1974).

As juveniles both mollymawks have a mostly dark bill, largely black underwings, and gray about the head and neck. Of these marks, the exact pattern of the underwing is highly variable between individuals and thus cannot be used to distinguish between the species (Warham et al. 1966, Marchant and Higgins 1990). These species are also extremely similar in upperpart pattern, foot coloration, size, and structure. Furthermore, the presence of a black "brow" is a common feature among the mollymawks (Warham and Bourne 1974), so despite being slightly more extensive or obvious on a Black-browed it is of little value in field identification.

Coloration and pattern of the bill and of the head are the two best means by which to distinguish between juvenile and immature Black-browed and Gray-headed albatrosses (Warham et al. 1966, Warham and Bourne 1974, Marchant and Higgins 1990). Bill coloration is perhaps the best single feature. On an immature Gray-headed Albatross, the bill is almost uniform blackish or dark gray, paling only toward the culmen or base (Warham et al. 1966, Tickell 1969, Warham and Bourne 1974). By contrast, on an immature Black-browed Albatross the bill is mostly gray, pinkish-gray, or yellowish-gray with a distinctly contrasting black tip (Warham et al. 1966, Tickell 1969, Marchant and Higgins 1990). The bird at Norfolk Canyon clearly had a pinkish-gray base to its bill with a contrasting black tip, thus indicating a Black-browed Albatross.

Head coloration and pattern also differs between immatures of these species. Even as a juvenile, the Gray-headed Albatross tends to have a mostly dusky-gray head, whereas the head of a juvenile Black-browed is much whiter (Warham et al. 1966, Marchant and Higgins 1990). However, the extent of gray on the head can be quite similar (Watson 1974), and individual Gray-headed Albatrosses "with more or less pale heads can be found" (Tickell 1969). Even so, a juvenile

Black-browed Albatross has a largely white head with a contrasting gray crown, nape, and narrow collar (Marchant and Higgins 1990). A juvenile Gray-headed Albatross has a mostly dusky-gray head (i.e., including the auriculars and extending almost to the throat), such that they appear to have a hood rather than a collar. The Norfolk Canyon bird had a mostly pure white head, with gray on the nape extending down the sides of the uppermost breast to form a narrow collar. Indeed, this bird looked extremely similar to the juvenile Black-browed Albatross in the photograph published by Harrison (1987).

Based on the coloration and pattern of the bill (pinkish-gray base with a black tip) and head and neck (largely white with a gray nape and breastband), the albatross at Norfolk Canyon was a juvenile Black-browed rather than a juvenile Gray-headed.

#### STATUS IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

The westernmost specimens of the Black-browed Albatross for the northern Atlantic Ocean are at Lille Hellefiskebanke off the west coast of Greenland in late August 1935 (Palmer 1962) and off the Caribbean island of Martinique 12 November 1956 (Bond 1959). There is an additional sight report for the Caribbean of two  $\pm 220$  km north-northeast of Los Roques 6 May 1968 (de Bruijne 1970). In stark contrast to their scarcity in the western North Atlantic, the Black-browed Albatross has been recorded on 35-plus occasions in the eastern North Atlantic (Lewington et al. 1991), including over 25 records for the British Isles by the late 1980s (Dymond et al. 1989). Alternatively, the Yellow-nosed Albatross has been reliably recorded on over 30 occasions in the western North Atlantic (McDaniel 1973, AOU 1998), yet remains virtually unknown in the eastern North Atlantic (Lewington et al. 1991).

It is unclear just how many previous records of the Black-browed Albatross exist for the western North Atlantic. The ABA (1996) stated that there are "over a dozen reports," whereas Brinkley (1997) stated that one in Massachusetts in fall 1996 represented the "ninth [record] in the western North Atlantic." We located 20–21 reports in the literature, most of which have not been reviewed by local records committees or have not been accepted by these committees; such reports should not be considered firm records. Reports exist for Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Florida (DeSante and Pyle 1986, ABA 1996, AOU 1998). In Canada, an unreviewed sight report  $\pm 50$  km northeast of Sydney, Nova Scotia, 15 July 1980 (Tufts 1986 [who incorrectly gave the year as 1983]) was considered hypothetical by Godfrey (1986), and was perhaps in Newfoundland waters (Vickery 1980). There are two additional sight records for Nova Scotia, one at Cabot Strait 21 July 1986 (Forster 1987) and one off Yarmouth 23 August 1991 (Mactavish 1992).

There are two or three records of the Black-browed Albatross for the United States that may be considered acceptable. Sight records of singles between Nantucket and Hyannis 16 September 1973, and  $\pm 40$  km east of Newburyport 11 July 1976, were accepted by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (Petersen 1995). Note that a 24 July 1976 report from near Newburyport, felt by some to be of the same bird as on 11 July (Veit and Petersen 1993), was accepted only as "albatross sp." by the Massachusetts Committee. A sighting at Manasquan, New Jersey, 24 October 1989 (Mlodinow 1999) was accepted by the New Jersey Bird Records Committee but the record remains controversial (P. E. Lehman pers. comm.).

All other reports of the Black-browed Albatross for the United States are generally treated as unacceptable or hypothetical. One at the Isle of Shoals on the Maine/New Hampshire border 1 August 1976, and seen an hour later east of Hampton, was considered to be

likely the same individual involved in the 1976 record from Massachusetts (Finch 1977). Also in this area, an adult was reported off Bailey Island, Maine, 28 May 1978 (Vickery 1978). A report of two near Bird Island in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, 28 June 1972 (DuMont 1973) has not been reviewed by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee, and an immature off South Beach 21 September 1996 (Ellison and Martin 1997) was accepted by that committee only as "albatross sp." (Petersen 1998). Furthermore, an adult albatross at George's Bank, Massachusetts, 2 May 1982 was felt to be this species (Nikula 1982) but could not be verified. Neither the ABA (1996) nor the AOU (1998) mentioned a record for Rhode Island, but one was reported on Cox's Ledge in early June 1980 (Vickery 1980). One reported off Hempstead, Long Island, New York, 27 May 1996 was not accepted by the New York State Avian Records Committee (1999). A report of two, an adult and an immature, observed off Cape May Point, New Jersey, 7 October 1974 (Scott and Cutler 1975) was treated as hypothetical by Sibley (1997). This report, and those of singles at Hudson Canyon  $\pm 64$  nautical miles southeast of Manasquan Inlet 27 May 1973 (Buckley and Davis 1973), 8 km east of Deal 5 July 1973 (Buckley and Davis 1973), and off Little Egg Inlet 5 December 1973 (Smith 1974), were not accepted by the New Jersey Bird Records Committee "due to a lack of documentation" (S. E. Finnegan pers. comm.). The single record for North Carolina, of two at sea south of Morehead City 19 August 1972 (DuMont 1973), was accepted as "Provisional" by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee (Tove et al. 1998), although Dumont (1973) noted that it was perhaps not as conclusive as others for North America. Lastly, the single report from Florida,  $\pm 30$  km off Cocoa Beach 13 September 1974, was considered unverified by Robertson and Woolfenden (1992).

Aside from the undocumented early December record for New Jersey, all previous reports of the Black-browed Albatross for the United States and Canada, hypothetical or not, fall exclusively between 27 May and 24 October. This temporal pattern matches the summer/fall peak in the eastern North Atlantic, where roughly three-fourths of the records are during this period (Dymond et al. 1989). Almost all other records for the eastern North Atlantic are during spring (mid-April to mid-May), although there are December records for Belgium and Spain, a January record for Britain, and a March record for Gibraltar (Lewington et al. 1991). Thus, the immature Black-browed Albatross off Virginia represents not only the first photographically documented record for the western North Atlantic, but it occurred at a time of year when it is largely unrecorded even in the eastern North Atlantic.

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