



Winging It

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Pelagic Birding off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina

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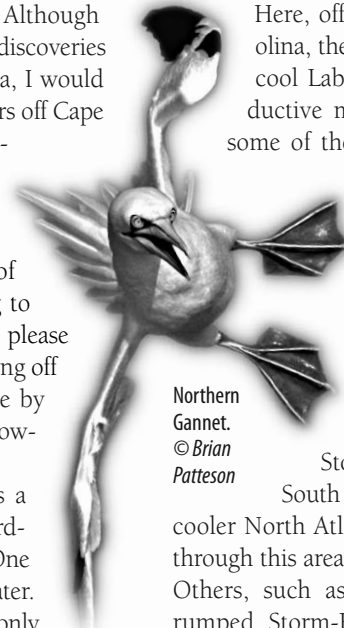
It has been nearly a decade since an article about pelagic birding off Cape Hatteras has appeared in *Winging It*, so I will begin with some history and a basic overview of the area. Although this piece mainly highlights recent discoveries and rarities associated with our area, I would like to remind readers that the waters off Cape Hatteras, and sometimes the shore itself, is also a great place to observe the more common and widespread pelagic species. For longtime ABA members with back issues of *Winging It*, or any readers wishing to explore the subject in more depth, please read the original treatise on seabirding off Hatteras in the January 1994 issue by Ned Brinkley and me, and my follow-up in the January 1999 issue.

The ocean off Cape Hatteras is a special place for seabirds and seabird-watchers for a number of reasons. One reason is close proximity to deep water. The edge of the Continental Shelf is only 25 miles from Hatteras Inlet, less than half the distance it is from Ocean City, Maryland or Charleston, South Carolina, and about a third of

the distance from the New Jersey coast! Cape Hatteras is about the same distance from the edge of the Gulf Stream, a warm ocean current, legendary for its importance to fishing off the East Coast and for its affects on climate across the Atlantic.

Here, off the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the Gulf Stream brushes against the cool Labrador Current, the result a productive marine ecosystem. Seabirds are some of the most conspicuous inhabitants here, over the course of the year the cast changes, as seabirds from throughout the Atlantic make passage through these waters.

Many seabirds travel thousands of miles to get here. Some, such as Greater and Sooty Shearwaters, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, all three jaegers, and South Polar Skua, are mostly bound for cooler North Atlantic waters, making a big push through this area in late spring and early summer. Others, such as Cory's Shearwater and Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, begin to appear in late spring, generally increases in numbers until late summer. Black-capped Petrel, a winter breeder in the West Indies, with its core range in the non-breeding seasons seemingly is the Gulf Stream, off the southeast coast of the U.S. Black-caps can usually be found in varying numbers for most of the year, here, off Cape Hatteras. During our winter, a different array of seabirds occurs, mostly in the cooler inshore waters. These include Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Great Skua, Razorbill, and others. Red Phalaropes winter at the edge of the Gulf Stream, with its sharp change in sea surface temperature.



Northern Gannet.
© Brian Patteson

Pelagic Birding off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Our knowledge of seabird distribution off the Carolina Coast is the result of over three decades of offshore exploration by keen seabirders and ornithologists. Much of the pioneering work was done in the seventies and eighties by David Lee of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, who made over 200 offshore survey trips, mostly from Oregon Inlet. Also, Bob Ake and Paul Dumont organized many pelagic trips for birders, mostly from Hatteras. In the early 1990s, Mike Tove and I began spending more time in deep water on our birding trips, and we proved the regular occurrence of two species that before had mostly gone unseen. These were Trindade and Fea's Petrels. By the mid-nineties, interest in North Carolina pelagic trips had increased and another gadfly petrel was added to the ABA Checklist, after I photographed a Bermuda Petrel off Hatteras in 1996. A couple of years later, two mega-rarities were documented on August 8, 1998. A boat-load of birders off Oregon Inlet saw and photographed a Bulwer's Petrel, while a Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel was found and photographed off Hatteras the same day! These new findings helped to renew interest in summer trips, which had been flagging behind spring trips, as our success with gadfly petrels on many of the spring trips had focused attention on trips in May and June.

The new millennium did not produce any more sightings of Swinhoe's or Bulwer's Petrels as we had hoped. However, we did begin to see the annual appearance of Bermuda Petrel, and this rekindled interest in Hatteras trips for the hundreds of birders, who by now had already seen both Fea's and Trindade Petrels, as well as the more common Gulf Stream specialties such as Black-capped Petrel, Audubon's Shearwater, Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, and Bridled and Sooty Terns. Once again, interest in summer trips declined, as we had a good run of Bermuda Petrels in spring, and we began to offer more spring dates than had been available in past years. It had been some time since we had seen a new bird for North America, but that changed in 2004. On one of the May 2004 trips, we found and photographed a Black-bellied Storm-Petrel, which was a new species for the North Atlantic! On August 15, one day after a tropical system forced the cancellation of one Hatteras trip, we got out and spotted a Cape Verde Shearwater among the numerous Cory's. Also photographed, this bird was one that we had been searching for since hearing about a shearwater that matched the description of this species in 1993.

The year 2005 will be remembered as the Year of the European Storm-Petrel. Actually, it all took place during one week. We had been looking hard for this species since I had unwittingly photographed one east of Cape Hatteras, on May 27, 2003. We had no luck in 2004, but on May 30, 2005, we had two boats out and we found them on each trip. The next day, with just one boat, we found them again. We did not have any trips for the following three days, but on the next trip, we found another one. We followed this with one more the next day. Prior to this "invasion", there had been only

one North American record of European Storm-Petrel, a bird that had been caught in a mist net on Sable Island, Nova Scotia. We had high-hopes to find more "Euros" the next year, but even with increased coverage in spring 2006 there was only one encounter. In 2007, we ran an unprecedented 15 consecutive days of spring trips, with two boats out on three of these days, finding the species twice, one each day, on May 28 and 29; both trips from Hatteras.

After the sighting of Black-bellied Storm-Petrel southeast of Oregon Inlet in 2004, I began to wonder how long it would be before another was found. It turned out to be just a couple of years! Kate Sutherland spotted one on a trip from Hatteras on July 16, 2006, and she found another on June 23, 2007, less than a year later.

Both birds were photographed. The two encounters with Black-bellieds, and recent sightings of Fea's and Bermuda Petrels during this mid-June-mid-July time period, helped reinforce my thoughts that anytime we can get offshore between mid-May-late-September would be worthwhile. In fact, the last three Bermuda Petrels to be photographed here, were found in July, August, and September!

Winter trips off Cape Hatteras also deserve special mention. Pelagic birding trips off North Carolina at that season did not really get going until the mid-1990s, although there had been over two decades of winter trips from Ocean City, Maryland and Virginia Beach, Virginia by that time.

After running trips from the latter two ports for many years, winter trips off Cape Hatteras during January, February, and March were a revelation. We found we didn't need to go very far offshore on some days, to see some birds that we had traveled 40-60 miles farther north to find before. Great Skua became more difficult to find regularly off Virginia and Maryland, since the establishment of the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone. The exclusion forced big foreign fishing trawlers, and their attendant gull flocks, off our banks. But, off Cape Hatteras, we began to see Great Skuas on most of our winter trips, often close to shore, among the gulls and gannets. Razorbill, which we often saw in small or modest numbers on trips farther north, was sometimes abundant (100s) off Cape Hatteras. On March 14, 1998,

we tallied 549 Northern Fulmars on a trip from Hatteras, and February 5, 2000, after watching a couple of Great Skuas, we found a Yellow-nosed Albatross, just three miles off Avon, North Carolina! Neither Dovekies nor Atlantic Puffins are usually as common here as they are farther north, but other spectacles, including enormous numbers of Northern Gannets and gulls (often including Little Gull among Bonaparte's), make Cape Hatteras a great destination for winter pelagic birding.

What does the future hold for pelagic birding off Cape Hatteras? It seems likely that there will be a better chance than ever to see the extremely rare Bermuda Petrel in the years to come. This species is slowly increasing in number and it nests just 600 miles away. Fea's and Trindade Petrels are reasonable target species if you put in the time. European and Black-bellied Storm-Petrels seem to be very rare, but are probably annual visitors. The sheer number of available trips has increased



Trindade Petrel
© Brian Patteson



Black-bellied Storm-Petrel © Brian Patteson



Manx Shearwater (foreground) and Cory's Shearwater © Brian Patteson

the odds for keen birders to see these rarities. On the other hand, some of our more common seabirds, the ones people take for granted, seem to be declining. These include the majestic Black-capped Petrel and the sleek little Audubon's Shearwater. Our daily tallies of all pelagic species on our trips, along with transect data, are helping us to learn about factors that affect local seabird distribution. These, and other at-sea data, are all that we really have to estimate the population of Black-capped Petrels, a species of special concern. What is missing is local data, from September–May. If, and when, we can convince birders to go offshore during some of these other seasons, we will learn more about these species, particularly Black-capped Petrel. It is very poorly known, on and near its nesting grounds, and practically impossible to census there. Wind energy and oil exploration seem likely for the Continental Shelf of North Carolina in the coming years, posing possible threats to seabirds. Now is the time to learn as much as we can about the seabirds that use these waters throughout the year, particularly the enigmatic Black-capped Petrel for which this area provides essential habitat.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the participants whose support has made these trips possible over the years. Kate Sutherland has worked harder than anyone to make these trips successful since 2000, and we have been fortunate to have such an outstanding volunteer staff of leaders and spotters. Steve N.G. Howell and Grayson Pearce, in particular, have donated

countless hours to the cause. Charter captains Dave Eason, Allan Foreman, John Gallop, Kevin Seldon, and Spurgeon Stowe, all helped us get to where we are today.

Captain Brian Patteson has been leading and organizing pelagic birding trips for over 20 years. His trips have helped to define our knowledge of seabird distribution off the mid-Atlantic and Southeast Coast. These days, with help from a sharp team of leaders and spotters, he operates the majority of trips on his boat, the 61-foot Stormy Petrel II, mostly from Hatteras, but occasionally from Oregon Inlet, North Carolina, or from Cape Henry, Virginia.

Suggested reading list for waters off the North Carolina Coast.

<http://www.seabirding.com/> - for trip lists from pelagic trips off Cape Hatteras

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