

General Field Notes

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First Record of Yellow-nosed Albatross for North Carolina

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On 5 February 2000, about 10:00, the authors and another two dozen observers (including Jamie Cameron, Derb Carter, Ricky Davis, John Fussell, and Harry LeGrand) located and studied a sub-adult Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*) on a pelagic trip about 3 miles east of Salvo, Dare County, NC. The bird was first seen as it landed on the water, apparently having been flushed as the boat maneuvered to approach a Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*) that was being observed. While swimming, the bird permitted close approach, affording us prolonged views within as little as 15 meters. Each time it flushed, it would fly a short distance and sit back down on the water. For about 10 minutes, we studied the bird in the air and on the water. It then flew to and landed among a large mass of gulls and gannets about 200 meters behind the boat and was not relocated.

The bird was immediately recognizable as an albatross by its extremely long, slender wings, short rounded tail, and long, saddle-shaped beak. Its body size was roughly intermediate between a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) and Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*). When it was sitting on the water, this size similarity made picking the bird out rather challenging. In flight, the wings were proportionately narrower and longer than those of a gannet and were parallel-edged fore and aft (Figure 1). In gliding flight, the wings were held in a distinct downward arc or bow.

The head was medium-light gray except for a white forehead and forecrown. There was moderate contrast between the darker head and white underparts. The eye was surrounded by a small wedge of black. The bill, longer than the head, was thicker at both base and tip than in the saddle-shaped middle.

It was black in color with a dirty lemon-yellow ridge (culminicorn) and a slightly reddish-black tip. The back and upperwings were dark gray, contrasting sharply with a white rump and, to a lesser extent, grayish head and neck. The primaries had white shaft bases that formed a series of short white streaks on the upper surface of the outerwing. The short, rounded tail was dark gray but paler than the back. The underwings were brilliant white with a narrow, well-defined blackish border, the leading edge being somewhat wider than the trailing. The underparts were white (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Yellow-nosed Albatross off North Carolina, dorsal view. Note the long, narrow wing profile, dark back and paler gray tail. Photo by Michael Tove.

The presence of a gray head is consistent with adult plumage. However, the dirty lemon-yellow culminicorn (as opposed to bright lemon-yellow) and tip mostly black with a slight reddish-orange cast (as opposed to bright reddish-orange) allowed the bird to be aged as a sub-adult.

There are two races of Yellow-nosed Albatross. The nominate *T. c. chlororhynchos* breeds in the southeastern Atlantic on Gough and the Tristan da Cunha island groups. It differs from the Indian Ocean form (*T. c. bassi*) in that the former has a gray head whereas the latter's head is white. The present bird was clearly a nominate *chlororhynchos*, as would be expected.

Yellow-nosed is the world's smallest species of albatross, whose measurements average barely larger than those of Great Black-backed Gull (Harrison 1983, 1987, Tipling & Enticott 1998). It is the second most abundant albatross species in the southern Atlantic after Black-browed (*T. melanophris*). It is also the most northerly distributed and the most frequently observed species off eastern North America (Patteson *et al.* 1999). In spite of this, it is appropriate that the documentation of such a record also eliminate all other similar species from consideration.



Figure 2. Yellow-nosed Albatross off North Carolina, ventral view. Note the grayish head, dark bill and narrow dark underwing borders, particularly along the trailing edge. Photo by Michael Tove.

Albatrosses are divided into several distinct sub-groups. The "mollymawks" (Genus *Thalassarche*) are southern albatrosses distinguished by white bodies and dark mantles. These include the rather large shy albatrosses (1-3 species depending on author) and four smaller, closely related species: Black-browed is the largest, followed by Buller's (*T. bulleri*), then Grey-headed (*T. chrysostoma*) and finally, Yellow-nosed. Black-browed is the only other species known from the northern Atlantic. Adult Black-broweds have a diagnostic

bright yellow bill and broad black underwing margins. Adult Buller's and Grey-headed have gray heads but a color much darker than the present bird, and Grey-headed lacks the white forecrown area. Both these species have yellow not only on the upper bill, but also the lower, a feature easily visible in the field (Tove, personal observations with Grey-headed). The present bird clearly had yellow only above. In addition, Buller's, a bird of the southern Pacific, has a broad black leading underwing edge and is noticeably larger-billed than Yellow-nosed. Grey-headed has very broad, dark underwing margins along the leading edge. None of these patterns matched that of the present bird.

Young Black-broweds have dusky bi-colored (not black) bills, sooty underwings and a distinct partial neck collar. Young Grey-headed and Buller's have white heads with distinct partial neck collars. These patterns were inconsistent with our bird.

In the northern Pacific, Laysan Albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) superficially resembles this group. However, its bill is bi-colored flesh with a black tip and the underwing has a distinct "W" pattern formed by two blackish triangular patches on each wing.

The only other credible record of an albatross from North Carolina was by DuMont (1973) of two Black-broweds off Morehead City on 19 August 1972. There are, however, three other published claims of albatrosses from North Carolina waters, none of which was considered acceptable by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee (NCBRC). The first two, reported by Lee (1984, 1987, 1995, 1998), were initially described only as "albatross species." However, the descriptions offered were vague and inconclusive at best and included contradictory statements that cast doubt on their identity as any albatross species at all. In a third case, Lee (1998) cited an unpublished report of Yellow-nosed that was subsequently judged by the NCBRC to be a probable Northern Gannett and not accepted (LeGrand *et al.* 1998).

While the February 2000 sighting constitutes the first accepted record of Yellow-nosed Albatross from North Carolina (North Carolina Bird Records Committee 2002), its presence in North Carolina waters is not surprising. Of the two species known from eastern North America, Yellow-nosed is the more commonly observed (Patteson *et al.* 1999, Tove 2000).

While albatrosses are the quintessential pelagic bird, in the Atlantic they do not readily reach Northern Hemisphere waters. This is largely due to the broad equatorial band of tropical water that lack the tradewinds albatrosses favor for their flight. In spite of this, there is growing evidence that small numbers do routinely drift into northern Atlantic waters. In fact, the present sighting was the first of an unprecedented number of Yellow-nosed Albatross sightings from eastern North America during the first half of 2000.

On 1 May, a Yellow-nosed was seen in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico, about 50 miles west of Tarpon Springs, Florida (Pranty 2000). On 9 May, a full adult was photographed near Martha's Vineyard off Penikese Island, Massachusetts (Perkins 2000), and on that same date, another was seen near Fire Island, New York (Buckley and Schairer 2000). These two locations are 217 km apart. On 21 May, an adult was seen over the south end of the Garden State

Parkway, near Cape May, New Jersey and on 23 May, one was seen slightly south of that location at the Delaware Bayshore area (Burgiel *et al.* 2000). On 4 June, one was seen off South Kingston, Rhode Island, and on 5 June one was off nearby Nantucket Island, Massachusetts (Burgiel *et al.* 2000).

Burgiel *et al.* (2000) speculated that all these sightings (excluding Florida's) involved the same individual as in North Carolina. We find it difficult to accept this hypothesis. First, to suppose that the same individual was involved with both May 9 sightings would also suppose that the bird flew 217 km in less than 6 hours (the sighting times were 11:45 AM and 5:30 PM). This seems highly unlikely. In addition, while the North Carolina bird was a sub-adult, many, if not all, of the May-June reports involved full adults. It seems unlikely that the North Carolina bird would have achieved this high state of adult plumage by early May (recalling that May is "winter" for the species).

We feel that the February through June sightings probably involved not fewer than four and very possibly five or more different individuals as follows: one, possibly two individuals off Massachusetts and Rhode Island, one off New York and possibly that or a different individual off New Jersey. In addition, we are unconvinced that any of these sightings was the same individual as the North Carolina bird and certainly, a different individual was seen in the Gulf of Mexico of Florida.

Finally, it is noteworthy that single Yellow-nosed were seen off Matinicus Rock in Maine on 6 July 1999 (Peterson 1999), off New Brunswick, Nova Scotia on 24 May 1993 (Maybank 1993) and again off New Brunswick on 20 June 1993 (Mactavish 1993). In addition, Patteson *et al.* (1999) photographed a young Black-browed at Norfolk Canyon, Virginia, on 6 February 1999. The question is whether this surge of sightings is an artifact of more intensive searching or related to some non-random factor. Certainly, the recent El Nino/La Nina phenomenon could have influenced movements of albatrosses. However, at this time, any connection would be purely speculative.

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