OCCURRENCE OF THE BLACK-CAPPED PETREL IN NORTH CAROLINA WATERS

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The Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata*) is the only species of gadfly petrel known to occur in the northwestern Atlantic with any regularity. Robbins et al. (1966) describe it as "a casual summer visitor to eastern North America during storms." The AOU Check-list (1975) lists it as rare and occurring north of Florida only accidentally. Therefore, it is interesting to report that this species appears to be a regular, though uncommon, offshore summer and early fall resident of North Carolina waters.

Six independent sight reports of 15 individuals have been recorded since 1972. Known dates of occurrence range from 18 May to 22 October. This period corresponds closely to the known seasonal distribution of other tropical species that regularly inhabit North Carolina's offshore waters during the summer, i.e. Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*), and Sooty Tern (*S. fuscata*) (Lee in press). The winter breeding period of the Black-capped Petrel is thought to run from 1 November to mid-May (Wingate 1964).

Reported observations and sightings known to me are as follows (° = observed by author): 22 October 1972, 50 miles SE Morehead City, 1 (Teulings 1973); 21 October 1973, 30 miles SSE Morehead City, 1 subadult (DuMont and DuMont 1974); 4 August 1974, off Hatteras, 6 (Teulings 1975a); 18 May 1975, in Gulf Stream off Hatteras, 2 (Teulings 1975b); 12 October 1975°, 21 miles off Cape Hatteras, three different sightings all assumed to be the same bird (Teulings 1976); 6 September 1976°, off Hatteras, 2 (P. DuMont and others); 14 October 1976°, 28 and 30 miles SSE of Oregon Inlet, 2 (NCSM field party). All sightings were confirmed by more than one observer.

Although precise locality data are not available for several of the sightings, all records are from 20-35 miles offshore. Apparently this species does not occur with any regularity inshore, as do many other pelagic birds. With the exception of the 14 October 1976 sightings, all observations have been made along or near the inner edge of the Gulf Stream. The lack of unusual weather systems prior to these sightings suggest that the individuals encountered were not storm waifs. Periods and locations of observations are so sporadic that no valid generalizations concerning relative abundance can be made at this time. The predominance of sightings off Hatteras probably is a result of the frequency with which Hatteras is used as a point of departure for pelagic bird trips. A 7 September 1975 Virginia record (Scott 1976) of a Black-capped Petrel also should be noted.

Black-capped Petrels were not reported from North Carolina waters until 1972. Apparently this was due to the infrequency of offshore trips prior to this time and the limited number of trained observers. Because this species can be confused with both Audubon's and Greater Shearwaters (*P. gravis*) and because Black-capped Petrels were not expected to occur regularly in U.S. waters, it is understandable that these birds were overlooked for many years. Additionally, they were greatly depleted at their known breeding sites during the 1800s (Bent 1922; Murphy 1936) and were at various times reported to be extinct. Although such reports were obviously premature, it is likely that this species is more common now than it has been in the past. Wingate (1964) reported the discovery and status of a breeding population on Hispaniola, this being the only known extant breeding colony.

When seen in good light and at close range, this species is readily distinguished from the smaller Audubon's and larger Greater Shearwaters. The extensive white areas on the upper tail coverts, neck, and underparts are diagnostic and contrast markedly with the black cap, tail, and back. The flight pattern is unlike that of the storm-petrels and normally more like that of the shearwaters. The following are excerpts from my

field notes.

"On 12 Oct. 1975 a group of 40 people observed a black-capped petrel on three separate occasions between 10:00 and 11:30 AM. At one point the bird was less than a 100 meters from the boat. It was feeding along the inner edge of the Gulf Stream 26 miles from shore. The white neck and rump and light ventral surface of the body and wings were conspicious as the bird maneuvered above the waves. In size and build it resembled a large shearwater. It seemed to keep its body and wings at approximately right angles to the surface of the water and constantly shifted position so that at one instant we were seeing its ventral side and the next its dorsal side. First one wing and then the other pointed down, creating an effect of dark and light flashing as the different surfaces were exposed to view. The pattern of flight was unlike any of the shearwaters or storm petrels, and the contrast of light and dark as the bird soared was striking." On 6 Sept. and 14 Oct. 1976 the birds were observed within 20-25 meters of the boat. On these occasions all field marks were noted, but the pattern of flight did not appear to be as erratic. All four birds were "soaring in wide, sweeping arcs; these arcs were wider and more rolling" than those of Cory's (*P. diomedea*) or Greater Shearwaters. On only one occasion was a bird observed flapping its wings. This individual apparently was flushed while resting on the surface and "When seen from a head-on position it resembled an Audubon's shearwater because of its dark and light coloration and its short, rapid wing beat. When the bird was parallel to the boat it banked, and the dorsal markings became visible. It then soared . . . until it disappeared on the horizon (6 Sept. 1976)." Over 45 bird watchers were present, and most of them had a good view of this bird. One of the two Black-capped Petrels seen on 14 October 1976 was apparently resting on the surface in a mixed flock of Cory's and Greater Shearwaters, but it was not spotted until after the birds has been flushed by the approaching boat. Several inexperienced observers later commented on the striking difference between this bird and the shearwaters. This individual was watched from a distance of 15 meters. A second individual seen on the same date was not well studied.

In retrospect it is likely that the differences in distance were partly responsible for my two descriptions of flight pattern. When viewed from a distance the sweeping arcs would be difficult to detect and only the "flashing" of the ventral and dorsal surfaces would be apparent as the bird rolled from one side of the arc to the other.

It is my opinion that the Black-capped Petrel is a regular summer and early fall resident in offshore waters of North Carolina. Future reports are needed to better document its season of occurrence and relative abundance, but there is certainly sufficient evidence of its presence to warrant its placement on the official state list of North Carolina birds.

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