

UNVERIFIED SIGHT RECORDS OF SEABIRDS IN NORTH CAROLINA WATERS

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Five seabirds not officially recognized as occurring in North Carolina's offshore waters have been sighted off Oregon Inlet between June 1977 and the present. These observations are, for the most part, probably inadequate for admission of the species to the state list. Our intent here is to inform bird students of these unverifiable occurrences so they will be aware of the possibility of encountering these species during those brief observation periods typical of offshore field trips. Although some of this information was available when the paper concerning additions to North Carolina's seabirds (Lee and Rowlett 1979) was submitted for publication, these birds were intentionally not included with those documented by specimens.

ALBATROSS

John B. Funderburg and Lee sighted a single albatross on 17 April 1978, 59 km SE of Oregon Inlet, Dare County, N.C. The large bird was soaring away from the boat low over the surface of the Gulf Stream. The only field marks observed were a light back and dark wings, suggestive of a Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Diomedea chlororhynchos*). During the brief observation the angle of view was such that an adequate check of other field marks was not possible. A bird assumed to be the same individual was seen 2 days later by the crew of the Oregon Inlet charter boat *Gal-O-Mine*. The captains at Oregon Inlet also reported single October 1976 and 1978 sightings of albatrosses. DuMont (1973) reported sighting two birds that appeared to be Black-browed Albatrosses (*D. melanophris*) off North Carolina, but the CBC Records Committee (see Parnell et al. 1978) did not accept the record as Black-browed. Harry LeGrand (pers. comm.) saw the individuals reported by DuMont, noting especially the under-wing patterns, and believes they were Black-browed. Even though specific identification was not made on the boat, because it was necessary to check numerous sources, LeGrand noted that the wing pattern excluded all other species. David Johnson (pers. comm.), who was also on the boat with DuMont, had no doubt that the birds in question were albatrosses but did not see enough field marks to confirm species identity. The dilemma of accepting sight records of albatrosses for the Atlantic Coast of the United States was discussed by McDaniel (1973). There is no doubt that albatrosses occur in Carolina offshore waters, but species confirmation is still needed.

LITTLE SHEARWATER

On 14 November 1978 we observed two or four birds that were probably Little Shearwaters (*Puffinus assimilis*) approximately 85 km SSE of Oregon Inlet. Two birds were watched for about 1 minute at 0940 at 35° 11'N, 75° 03'W, and two (possibly the same birds) were seen at 1240 at 35° 13'N, 74° 51'W. The latter were pursued for about 4 minutes at a speed of 43 to 47 kmph. Although we were able to keep up, we were unable to overtake the birds.

The first encounter was 0.8 km W of the inner edge of the Gulf Stream (water temperature 17.5°C); the second was along the inner edge (water temperature of Gulf Stream 24.4°C). The birds flew only about 1 meter above the surface, alternating a rapid flapping and short, gliding flight pattern. Wind velocity was less than 8 kmph and may account for seemingly abbreviated periods of gliding. When we first saw them from a distance, we thought they were alcids; but as we moved closer, it was obvious that they were small shearwaters. At no time were we closer than 30 m, and at this distance the birds appeared virtually tailless. Although face patterns were not observed, it was apparent that these black-and-white shearwaters were not Audubon's (*P. lherminieri*) or Manx Shearwaters (*P. puffinus*) because of the combination of small size, rapid wingbeat, and very short tails. We are familiar with both of these species under field conditions at sea and feel certain that the birds observed were not either; thus, our specific identification is based largely on elimination processes.

Post (1967) summarized the five reported sight records of *P. assimilis* and two specimen records for the northwestern North Atlantic. He also discussed field identification (Post 1964). The only record for the southeastern coast is an August 1883 storm specimen from Charleston County, S.C. The present report is the first for North Carolina.

BLUE-FACED BOOBY

Captain Allen Foreman described to us a bird he saw on 7 July 1979 near the Diamond Shoal Light, Dare County, N.C. His description of the size, shape, coloration, and behavior of the bird left little doubt that it was a Blue-faced Booby (*Sula dactylatra*). Foreman and his mate both mentioned a large white bird, smaller than a Gannet (*Morus bassanus*), with a long pointed bill, a short tail edged with black, and dark wing tips. The mate saw the bird plunge below the surface (feeding), and for several minutes the bird flew around the boat. When both men were shown various bird identification books, they independently picked the Blue-faced Booby illustrations as being representative of the bird they saw.

On 11 July 1979, while we were surveying seabirds 65 km SE of Oregon Inlet, the captain of one of the other boats in the Oregon Inlet fleet radioed to tell us of a pair of unusual birds feeding around his boat. His description, although not as detailed as Foreman's, indicated the presence of two Blue-faced Boobies. The boat was about 2.4 km from us, but the birds were no longer there when we arrived.

Holmes (1966) reported the first sighting of the Blue-faced Booby in North Carolina on 7 June 1966 at Bogue Banks, recording field marks that left little question as to the specific identity. He noted that 3 days after his observation, Tropical Storm Alma, whose influence had been felt over a large area of the Caribbean Sea, pounded the North Carolina coast with rain and 81-kmph winds.

During the period of 5 through 7 July 1979, Captain Foreman and his mate observed massive flocks of shearwaters, primarily Cory's (*P. diomedea*), feeding on schools of squid migrating just below the surface of the Gulf Stream. The number of birds per flock was estimated to be 150 to 200, but occasionally flocks of thousands were encountered. Other captains from the Oregon Inlet fleet, as well as captains from as far south as Cape Hatteras, also encountered these heavy concentrations of shearwaters, commenting that they had never before seen such a congregation of birds. This activity persisted for 3 days (5-7 July). Four days later, during our seabird survey on 11 July, there was no evidence of these flocks. The shearwaters had apparently dispersed or followed the migrating squid, and only modest numbers of Cory's Shearwaters and other species were evident. Perhaps the boobies reported to us were initially drawn into the area by the unusual concentration of food.

BROWN BOOBY

Along with John E. Cooper and John Connors, we sighted what we believe was a Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*) on 10 May 1979 near the Diamond Shoals light. The bird was watched for about 4 minutes as it traveled from east to west, but at no time were we closer to it than 150 m. Its long pointed wings suggested a tern, but its flight pattern did not. The bird had a direct horizontal flight, flapping with deep, regular wingbeats at estimated heights of 8 to 11 m, then gliding forward and downward until 2 to 4 m above the ocean, followed again by flapping and repetition of the entire process. As the bird came closer, its contrasting brown dorsal and white ventral surfaces were apparent. The white extended onto the under wing. The tail was of modest length and pointed. It was a large bird but distance made it difficult to judge size accurately. It seemed as large as a Royal Tern (*Sterna maxima*) or larger, yet smaller than a Gannet, both of which had been encountered earlier that day. Cooper noted that the leading under surfaces of the wings were dark. Because we at no time had a distinct view of the head and neck, we can relate little about their shape or markings. (It should be mentioned, however, that the light bill of a Brown Booby would probably be difficult to observe at a distance.) We are able to confirm few other details. The combination of observed characters and distinctive flight pattern eliminated other North Atlantic seabirds. Nevertheless, the distance involved, our inability to confirm certain markings, and complete lack of experience with *Sula* suggest that future sightings should be required before

the species is admitted to North Carolina's hypothetical bird list. The Brown Booby has previously been reported as accidental in coastal areas of Massachusetts, New York, and South Carolina.

NODDY TERN

Along with Mike Browne, Fran Baldwin, and others, Lee observed two Noddy Terns (*Anous* sp.) feeding during a heavy rain in a tide line 13 km NE of Oregon Inlet. The birds, which were in association with Sandwich Terns (*S. sandvicensis*) and Common Terns (*S. hirundo*) were followed for about 20 minutes on 9 June 1977 before heavy seas forced us to leave. Their large size, wedge-shaped tail, and dark bodies and wings distinguished them from the other terns, although the weather, the seas, and the angle of view were unfavorable. We were twice within 10 to 20 m of the birds and were able to see the white cap on one individual. There are three other sightings of *Anous* in North Carolina: 29 August 1949 (Chat 15:33); 16 June 1974 (Am. Birds 28:890); and 3 September 1977 (P. DuMont et al., pers. comm.). Because distinguishing species of *Anous* in flight is difficult, North Carolina identifications of Brown or Black Noddy Terns are speculative and strongly influenced by geographic probability. [Brown Noddy Terns (*A. stolidus*) have since been collected in North Carolina. Details on NCSM specimens 7319, 7320, 7321, and 7352 will be published with other bird records resulting from Hurricane David.—ED.]

Western North Atlantic records of the species and species groups discussed here are extremely interesting. We hope that observers will make every attempt to document sight records with as many field marks and behavioral traits as possible. At the same time, they must realize that specific identifications may not always be possible. Extreme caution is advisable in the reporting of very rare species because sightings are so infrequent that a few erroneous identifications could completely mask specific patterns of seasonal, geographical, and ecological occurrence. We hope that the rationale for our conservative attitude in these particular sightings is understood, and that future observations will allow fully convincing documentation of field marks.

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