

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

First Photographic Record of Black-browed Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophrys*) in North Carolina

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The authors joined about 20 other birders aboard the *Stormy Petrel II* for a pelagic trip off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina on 18 February 2012. The trip was organized and led by Captain Brian Patteson, with Kate Sutherland, Bob Fogg, and Dave Shoch spotting. Many of the regularly occurring winter target species were found, including Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*), Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*), Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*), Dovekie (*Alle alle*), and Razorbill (*Alca torda*). Trip participants saw at least 38 Loggerhead Turtles (*Caretta caretta*), more than Patteson had ever recorded in a single day offshore. As the ship was heading back to Hatteras Inlet in the late afternoon and with a little bit of chum remaining, we maintained a flock of gulls and gannets coming to the boat. Less than two miles from Hatteras Inlet, a cry of "Albatross!!" rang out at the stern from spotter Bob Fogg. As expected, excitement and mayhem ensued for a couple of minutes while passengers and crew tried to locate the bird for themselves. To the delight of all on board, the bird settled onto the water very close to the boat, and everyone easily identified a full adult Black-browed Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophrys*) (Figure 1). A nearby fishing boat with a handful of passengers stopped by to briefly view the bird as well.



Figure 1. North Carolina's first photographically documented Black-browed Albatross (middle) rests on the water with a Northern Gannet (left), and a Great Black-backed Gull (right). Photo by Jeffrey S. Pippen.

Observers watched the Black-browed Albatross for nearly 45 minutes as thousands of photos were snapped from as close or closer than 10 meters (easily within cell phone camera range). Sutherland attracted the albatross to our wake with the rest of the chum, enabling close range views of the albatross in flight and resting on water with Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. marinus*), Northern Gannets (*Morus bassanus*), Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), and other common near-shore birds (Figure 2). It flew with stiff wings, and settled onto the water several times. Finally, just before 5:30 pm EST and as daylight was waning, the albatross took flight and disappeared eastward out of sight as the boat motored toward the inlet full of elated birders.

While the albatross was still in sight, we observed a very large, gull-like bird sitting high on the water. It was bulkier bodied and longer-winged, but relatively more slender-winged, than nearby Great Black-backed Gulls. Its head was large and white with dark eyes, a dark smudge in front of each eye, and a thin, short, dark line behind each eye ending before or just at the nape. The bill was pinkish-orange with a more richly pinkish-orange hooked tip, and nostrils were visible approximately one-fourth the distance from base to tip. The bird's neck was thick and white. Its undersides and rump were white and contrasted sharply with the jet black back, tail and dorsal wings. Its legs and feet were dull grayish-pink. In flight, the underwings were whitish but were outlined with black, which was thicker along the leading edge compared to the trailing edge. We identified this bird as belonging to the nominate subspecies



Figure 2. The Black-browed Albatross (front center) was located less than two miles from Hatteras Inlet. Hatteras Island is visible in the background of this photo. Photo by Jeffrey S. Pippen.

(*T. [m.] melanophris*) rather than the Campbell Albatross (*T. [m.] impavida*) subspecies, which is sometimes treated as a separate species and shows pale yellowish eyes in adults (Howell 2012).

This represents the first photographically documented North Carolina Black-browed Albatross record, which was accepted by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee, elevating this species to the state's Definitive List (Tove et. al. 2013). The only prior North Carolina record accepted by the committee was of two sub-adult birds seen (but not photographed) on 19 August 1972 south of Morehead City (DuMont 1973).

Distribution along the Atlantic Coast

Although there have been approximately 25 reports of Black-browed Albatross in the western north Atlantic, most of these reports have not been reviewed by records committees, and less than 10 have been accepted as valid records (see summaries by Patteson et al. [1999], Davis [2009], and Coffey [2012]). Howell (2012) considers acceptable records only from Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Martinique, but mentions that some of the other reports "may be correct."

The first photographic documentation of Black-browed Albatross in North America occurred on 6 February 1999 off Virginia Beach, Virginia at the Norfolk Canyon (Patteson et al. 1999). In June 2004, a Black-browed Albatross was apparently photographed off Newfoundland for a first photographically documented record in Canadian waters; however, those photographs have not been published to our knowledge (Davis 2009). In August 2009, an adult was well photographed off Newfoundland from a longliner crab fishing vessel (Coffey 2012). Additionally, a sub-adult Black-browed Albatross was photographed off Maine in July 2009 (Peterson 2010).

There were two subsequent Black-browed Albatross records from the western North Atlantic in 2012: a dead adult found in Clyde River, Nunavut in July made for a first province record, and an adult photographed off of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts waters in December (Phil Davis, pers. comm.). Either (but not both) of these birds could theoretically be the same individual that we photographed near Hatteras Inlet in February. The most recent documented Black-browed Albatross record was a 'juvenile' photographed in the Bahamas in July 2013 (Phil Davis, pers. comm.), which is only the second record for the Caribbean and the first since the Martinique bird in 1956.

The Black-browed Albatross is an IUCN Red List category near-threatened species with the most recent world population estimated to be approximately 1,150,000 individuals (Bird Life International 2013). The population has been in decline for several decades, and this decline is mostly attributed to mortality associated with longline and trawling fisheries as well as habitat destruction at nest sites (Bird Life International 2013).

In summary, of the approximately 25 reports of Black-browed Albatross for the western North Atlantic, only eight have been verified by photographic documentation. Our bird is the first Black-browed Albatross to be photographed in North Carolina waters and documents the first *adult* Black-browed Albatross to be photographed within waters of the United States.

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Correction

An editorial mistake was made in the 2013 Annual Report of the South Carolina Bird Records Committee published in the Winter 2014 issue. A paste error resulted in an extra paragraph in the Northern Saw-whet Owl account that should not have been included. The error is not present in the issue as published on-line, but is present in the printed issue. I apologize for this error.