

Beginners' Guide to



This advice about ocean outings
will prepare you to see species
that landlubbers usually miss.

by John Rakestraw



MIKE DANZBAKER

Pelagic Trips



A pelagic outing takes birders out to seabirds that they otherwise never might see up close.

Bottom Left: Birders rarely see Xantus's Murrelets, a warm-water species, from shore.

HERBERT CLARKE

are wondering: Yes, I have done my share of “chumming.”

You can see all these birds from shore.

Many seabirds *are* visible from shore on occasion. Even if you live close enough to the coast to run out to your favorite seawatch site every time a storm blows in, it will take many years and a lot of luck to build much of a seabird list

from land.

How well can you actually see these birds? Many land-based sightings involve birds more than 1 mile from shore. Even with a good scope, can you get a good look at a bird that far away?

Face it: Many seabirds spend their lives on the open ocean, far from shore. Some come aground only in the Southern Hemisphere, where they nest on remote little islands *that you never will visit*. Even near-shore species frequently occur several miles from shore.

If you want to see these birds, you need to go to them.

Seabirds are too difficult to identify. Some seabirds are difficult to identify. Some warblers are difficult to identify. Some sparrows are difficult to identify. What's your point? Any group of unfamiliar birds will pose some challenges—but isn't this one of the main reasons to go birding: to find and identify new species?

As with any birding trip, you should do your homework ahead of time. Consult various field guides to familiarize yourself with the species that might appear during the trip. This is extremely important for pelagic birding, because your only view of a bird might be of one individual that flies by your boat and keeps on going. If you bird with an organized tour, the trip leaders will help you learn to recognize the likely species.

Pelagic trips are expensive. Think again. My latest pelagic trip cost \$88. For that fee, I was transported on a large boat for eight hours by a professional captain and one crewman. I also enjoyed the services of *four* professional birding guides who pointed out birds and answered my questions. Where else can you hire six professionals to take you birding for eight hours for less than \$100?

While the number of outfitters offering pelagic birding trips continues to grow, you don't have to take an organized tour. If a friend likes to fish, ask if you can tag along. Sometimes birders can join fishing charter trips for a reduced rate.

Pelagic birding is just for “hard-core” birders. Pelagic birding is not just for those grizzled men and women who have seen all the terrestrial species and must go to sea to find new species for The Life List. Birders of any level can enjoy the birds and other species of wildlife found on a pelagic trip.

Even the most casual birder can appreciate a huge albatross flying just a few feet from the boat or marvel at a tiny phalarope or storm-petrel swimming on the open ocean miles from shore. The opportunity to see marine mammals, fish and other creatures on a pelagic trip is an added benefit that birders of every level will enjoy.

Valuable Role

Seeing species that you can't observe from shore is the most obvious reason to take pelagic trips, but there is another reason. Your sightings are important. The population and distribution of

will come right out and say it: You have to take pelagic trips. You may have been putting it off for years or decided to never get on a boat. Perhaps you have taken a pelagic trip or two and think that you have “been there, done that.”

Regardless, take advantage of any opportunity to include the open ocean in your birding repertoire. There are birds out there that you won't see unless you go to them.

Reasons, Schmeasons

You will hear a lot of reasons not to go to sea looking for birds. Very, very few of them are valid.

I get seasick. Everything you read about pelagic birding has a big section on seasickness. Getting seasick has nothing to do with birding. If you are prone to motion sickness, it doesn't matter whether you are birding, fishing, pleasure boating or smuggling bootleg Barry Manilow CDs.

If you have a problem with motion sickness, consult your doctor and take steps to prevent it, or just live with it. In case you

**Birders wait to depart Machias Seal Island
in Maine, known for Atlantic Puffins.**

ARTHUR MORRIS



For More Information...

Books

All the standard field guides describe seabirds, at least those birds usually found close to shore. The following books go into much greater detail and may prove helpful to birders trying to sort out these challenging species.

Seabirds of the World: A Photographic Guide by Peter Harrison (A&C Black, 2000)

Seabirds of the World: The Complete Reference by Jim Enticott and David Tipling (Stackpole Books, 1997)

Ocean Birds of the Nearshore Pacific by Rich Stallcup (1990)

Guide to the Offshore Wildlife of the Northern Atlantic by Michael H. Tove (University of Texas Press, 2001)

Trip Directory

The American Birding Association publishes an annual directory of pelagic trips on its website. The directory describes trips from both coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico, and it provides direct links to the trip operators: <http://americanbirding.org/publications/wgpeldi.htm>

Websites: general information

www.neseabirds.com (pelagic birding in New England)

www.oceanwanderers.com (pelagic birding along with other I.D. challenges)

Websites: trip operators that offer helpful information

California: www.montereyseabirds.com, <http://shearwaterjourneys.com>

Oregon: <http://thebirdguide.com>

Washington: www.westportseabirds.com

Florida: www.southfloridabirding.com/html/pelagic_tour.htm

mid-Atlantic coast: www.patteson.com

northern Atlantic coast: www.focusonnature.com, www.paulagics.com

—J.R.

species constantly are changing, and birders often are the most valuable source of this information.

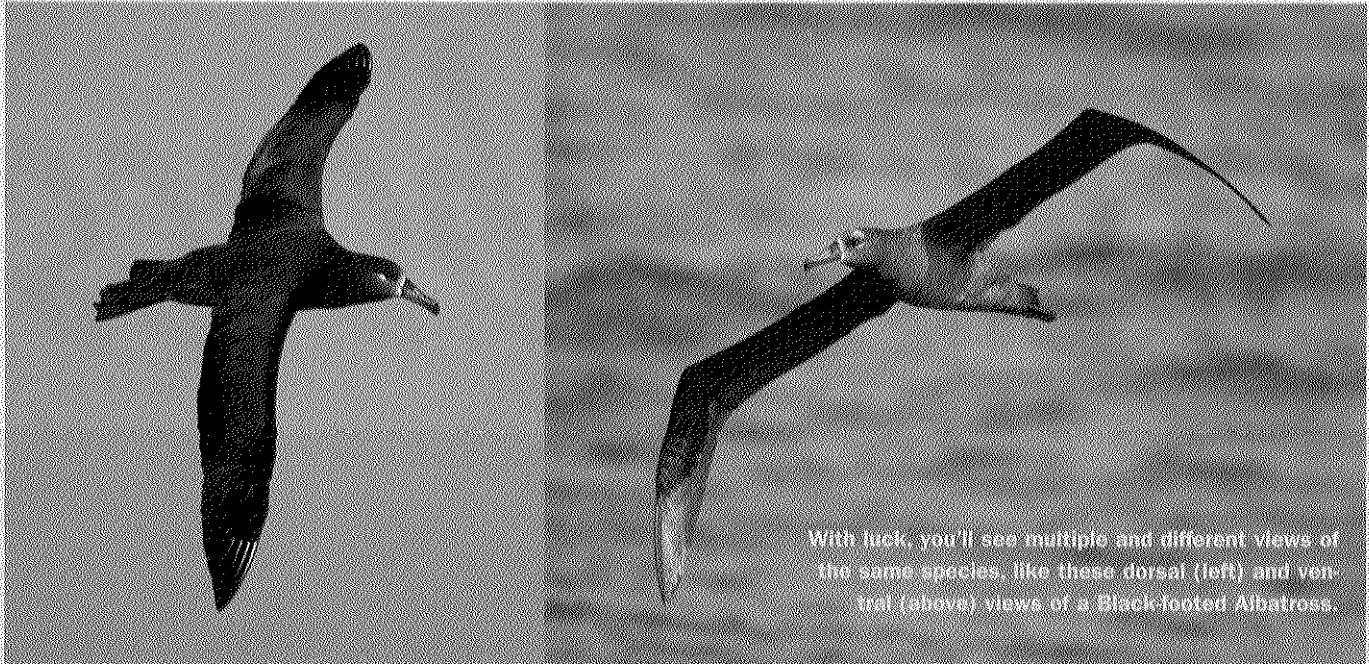
When the eastern population of House Finch expanded its range to meet its western counterparts in the 1980s, birders kept track of their progress. When West Nile Virus started killing crows and raptors a few summers ago, everyone took notice. Since so few birders are out on the oceans, changes in seabird populations are not sufficiently documented.

But these changes are occurring. Manx Shearwaters once were considered limited to the Atlantic, but this species is turning up more frequently off the west coast (see *Birding* vol. 36, no. 6). Climate changes are raising water temperatures off the central California coast, resulting in a decline of cold-water species like Black-footed Albatross and an increase in warm-water species like Xantus's Murrelet (see California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigations Report, vol. 36).

Which species are expanding their ranges? What are the population trends of the more common seabirds? This information becomes available only when birders get out there and report their findings.

Gear Choices

Once you decide to hit the water, what do you need to take? Waterproof outer-



With luck, you'll see multiple and different views of the same species, like these dorsal (left) and ventral (above) views of a Black-footed Albatross.

wear (a good rain jacket and rain pants) is essential in all but the most tropical climates. Temperatures on the open ocean can be quite chilly, even in the summer, so you don't want to get wet from spray or rain. Wear shoes that will keep your feet dry *and* provide traction on wet decks.

Always bring food, drink and anything else you need for your creature comforts so that you can remain alert. It is very tempting to take a little snooze in the middle of an eight-hour trip, but the moment you let down your guard will be the precise moment that a Short-tailed Albatross or a Mottled Petrel will make its brief fly-by before disappearing.

Think about your binocular. The glass you use for your land-based birding may not be the best choice for pelagic birding. For most of my birding, I use a ten-power binocular, one of the best models on the market. A vibrating diesel engine combined with eight-foot swells, however, make these wonderful 10x binoculars pretty worthless on a boat. For boat trips, I use a 7x binocular so the image is steadier and the field of view is a little wider, making it easier to follow flying birds.

Waterproof binoculars are a must, as your binocular probably will get wet on a pelagic trip. Your lenses are likely to get salt and sand on them whenever you bird near the ocean. It is much safer to rinse your binocular under the kitchen sink than to wipe these abrasive substances off the lenses.

Don't bother lugging a spotting scope

and tripod on board: these are worthless on a boat. If you enjoy bird photography and have a lens that can be hand-held, however, bring your camera. If you can provide photographic documentation of a rarity, the other members of your trip, especially the trip leaders, will be very grateful.

Location, location, location

Consider where to stand on the boat. Should you stake your claim to the front, one of the sides, or the back? On some boats, you may have the option of an upper deck. Each spot has its advantages and disadvantages.

The front of the boat is the best place to see alacids, those little seabirds that tend to fly away or dive as the boat approaches. The disadvantages to the bow are the wave splash, the up-and-down motion and the unstable footing, all of which can occur in rough water.

The back of the boat usually is the best place to see gulls and other birds attracted to the chum slick. These birds often follow the boat when it is in motion and will land on the water when the boat stops to chum. The stern also is the place where you will smell the diesel fumes and the dead fish and squid used for chumming the birds. These odors are not the most pleasant, especially if you are not feeling too good.

The sides of the boat, near the middle, usually experience the least amount of up-and-down motion. If you place one leg on the lower rail and wedge yourself between

the rail and the cabin, you will have fairly stable viewing through your binocular. The disadvantage to standing on one side of the boat is the fact that you can't see what's happening on the other side. It is quite frustrating to have the boat's cabin between you and a rare bird.

If your boat has an upper deck, this may provide the greatest field of view. Unfortunately, the rocking is amplified on the upper deck. If your stomach is not too seaworthy, stay closer to the water line.

You must go to sea to find many species of birds that you just won't see otherwise. The ranges and populations of seabirds are changing, so your sightings are very important. If you ever doubt whether you should make the effort to take a pelagic trip, I would offer this advice: Quit whining, and get on the boat. There are birds out there! **WB**

A guide and freelance writer, John Rakestraw leads classes and field trips for Portland Audubon. He serves as an alternate on the Oregon Bird Records Committee and currently is working on a birder's guide to Oregon.

www.wildbirdmagazine.com..

In early February, look at www.wildbirdmagazine.com/pelagic for a directory of pelagic tour operators.