

F O C U S



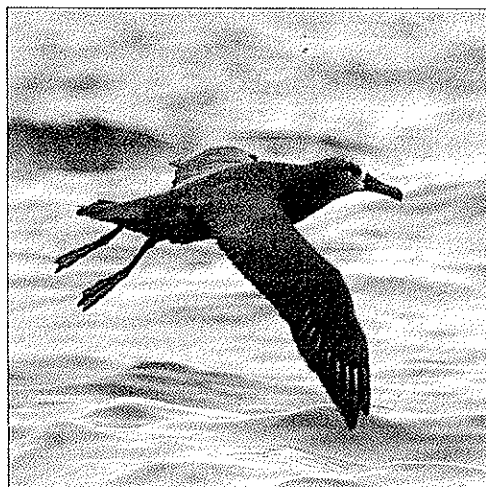
63

...just beyond the breakers and past the headlands to the continental shelf...

Autumn ocean migration

Seeking Seabirds

Rich Stallcup



Black-footed Albatross.

Beautiful words like albatross, fulmar, jaeger, storm-petrel, shearwater, and skua bring forth visions of mystical avian creatures that might exist only in mariner's legend. But, in truth, they are real, they are common, and they are close—just beyond the breakers, past the headlands, to the continental shelf and beyond—*seabirds*—those that would never willingly go to land, except to breed.

Seabird diversity offshore California (from Point Conception, north) is as great as anywhere else in the world, and generous portions of it can be encountered during relatively comfortable, one-day boat trips.

While there is an abundance of seabirds and species diversity throughout the year, *fall* is the best season to go to sea in search of them. In fall there is an endless parade of migrants from the Arctic going south and of southern-

hemispheric breeders coming north to feast in the cold, nutrient-rich waters of the nearshore Pacific.

Autumn Passage. Fall seabird migrations might be said to begin in mid-July, with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Sooty Shearwaters and a few South Polar Skuas from the South Pacific, the appearance of the first few jaegers and Sabine's Gulls from the Arctic, the fledging of locally nesting alcids, and the year's largest presence of Black-footed Albatross.

July is also turning out to be a fine month for ultra-mega rarities, like the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (17 July 1994) and the Great-winged Petrel (21 July 1997), both found at Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary and both new records for the top-half of Earth.¹

As August rolls along, so do myriad seabirds, sometimes in astonishing numbers and many kinds, until a pelagic climax occurs in mid-September. Even on an average trip on Monterey Bay in September, one might see four or more species of shearwater, three of storm-petrel, an albatross, the South Polar Skua, all three kinds of jaegers, Arctic Tern, Sabine's Gull, two phalaropes, two auklets, a murrelet, and a Tufted Puffin!

Blue and humpback whales are routine, as are four to six types of small cetaceans, five of pinnipeds, blue shark, mola mola and, with luck, a leatherback

turtle. Some birds, like Black-legged Kittiwake and Ancient Murrelet, will become more reliable after mid-October, but by then many of the passing migrants are gone.

Doing It. *Just commit!* Contact Shearwater Journeys (with expert bird and mammal leaders on each trip), and reserve spaces on one of the many trips offered throughout the year. If it's your first time out or you are wondering about seasickness, join a regular Monterey Bay trip, usually short in duration (about seven hours) and *very* productive for both seabirding and marine mammal encounters.

Pick a date (from the long list of options on their website) between mid-August and mid-October, take medication, be on time, get on the boat, and *go*. Even those who have weathered some discomfort would never trade the experience. Infirmity passes; connections with great whales and skuas do not.

Rich Stallcup is PRBO's Naturalist, in our Education Program.

Locating Ocean Bird Trips

Shearwater Journeys 831-637-8527
www.shearwaterjourneys.com
email: debi@shearwaterjourneys.com

Monterey Bay Whalewatch Seabird Cruises
831-375-4658, www.montereyseabirds.com
email: trips@montereybaywhalewatch.com

Los Angeles Audubon Society
323-874-1318, www.laaudubon.org
email: peltrip@laaudubon.org

¹ As this *Observer* went to press, another new seabird species for the North Pacific was sighted at Cordell Banks—a Corey's Shearwater on 8 August 2003!