

## **BBC PELAGIC 7.16.11**

Marshall Iliff

The Brookline Bird Club ran a full-day pelagic trip to the offshore canyons of the Continental Shelf off Massachusetts on 16 July 2011. With Steve Mirick, Jeremiah Trimble, James P. Smith, Naeem Yusuff, and myself on board as leaders, we departed Hyannis aboard the Helen H with Captain Joe Huckemeyer at the helm. We set a course for an area of warm water with a sharp temperature break, that was situated just west of Atlantic Canyon and just east of Block Canyon. Our route took us into Rhode Island waters for part of the trip (based on a closest point of land approach to state lines). The birds were excellent, with great looks at the three most expected shearwaters (Sooty tends to get uncommon by this date), nice experiences with both Pomarine and Long-tailed Jaegers, and stellar looks at good numbers of Leach's Storm-Petrels visiting our chum slick for the second year in a row. It was the non-bird fauna that was probably the highlight, with four species of sharks (!), Loggerhead Sea Turtle, two dolphins, and numerous Fin Whales.

By first light we were seeing a few shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrel, and not long after that we were treated to a high-flying Pomarine Jaeger that flew over the bow on a direct flight to the east as we headed south. A bit later in the morning we had our first of six Manx Shearwaters for the day. Not long thereafter, Benjamin van Doren of New York spotted a fin off to the starboard side, and when we approached it became apparent that it was a large Basking Shark. Although Basking Sharks can be considered regular in these waters, we had not encountered one on any of our recent trips, so this was a real treat. As is often typical, the birding was rather slow in the 20-30 miles before the Continental Shelf, with just the occasional Wilson's Storm-Petrel or shearwater to break the doldrums.

Once we reached the edge of the Continental Shelf, there were instant signs of activity. Storm-Petrel numbers increased and we soon had our first Leach's Storm-Petrel cross the bow. A few Great Shearwaters kept us company and later a couple Cory's appeared. We set about trying to get ourselves to the warm water temperature break and continued south into deeper water. Eventually the Sea Surface Temperature started to climb from 67 F to 70 F to 72 F and ultimately to 73.5 F, which was where it stabilized for most of our time offshore. Once in the warmer waters, we cruised more slowly and chummed intermittently. In addition to hoping for rarities, we tried to make sure everyone on the boat had good looks at Leach's Storm-Petrels, which can be tricky birds to see well due to their flightiness, high speed of flight, and similar appearance to Wilson's Storm-Petrels. After some effort, we managed to get everyone on these fast-flying storm-petrels and the birds thankfully provided excellent side-by-side comparisons with the smaller Wilson's.

A few Portuguese Man O' War (jellyfish) made for nice sightings, but the trip highlight was yet to come. As we were motoring slowly east, a large 4-5 ft scimitar-shaped fin broke the surface. None of us immediately knew what we were looking at, and Capt. Joe and the leaders were all struggling to identify what we had just seen

as we steered the boat towards the odd fin. Standing in front, Jeremiah Trimble and I noticed a large dorsal fin break the surface, which reminded us of the Basking Shark from earlier...only different. Maybe even larger. As we watched with binoculars and drew ever closer, suddenly we started to see pale spots on the fin. Almost in unison, we started shouting WHALE SHARK, at which point Steve Mirick excitedly started announcing it over the microphone. Steve's excitement may have exceeded even ours. For those of us on the trip, his stream of ecstatic narration will never be forgotten and might not be appropriate to repeat here. Suffice it to say that Steve never expected to see a Whale Shark on these trips (it represented one of just a handful of records in New England, and Captain Joe, who has spent countless hours at sea in these waters, had seen just one before). The animal actually approached the boat while we were standing still and sort of kissed our port side beam — as it swam away, we could see flecks of blue paint on its snout, presumably from its sandpaper-like skin rubbing paint from the boat. It looped away from the boat and then made a second pass back under the bow, affording more incredible look and giving Steve cause to continue his stream of...excitement. For almost everyone aboard, this was the moment of the trip and we all felt really lucky to have seen such a rare fish.

The great fish for the trip continued a short while later, as we chummed up a flock of several hundred storm-petrels (including multiple Leach's). After 10-15 minutes of chumming, a fin broke the surface back in the wake and we all watching as a large Tiger Shark popped its snout out of the water repeatedly and chowed down on the beef suet that we had tossed overboard to attract seabirds. It ate its way up to our stern, and then started to make a pass at two decoys that artist Keith Mueller had carved special for this trip. Incredible works of art—one of a Great Shearwater and one of a Great Skua—these decoys had been deployed in our chum slick to try to attract more birds to us. In this instance, they did not fool the bird, but they did fool the Tiger Shark, which started to stalk and hunt the shearwater until it was reeled back in just in the nick of time!

As we continued eastward we had other great sightings: a couple of Atlantic Manta Rays (the brown form), a Loggerhead Sea Turtle which gave great views next to the boat, numerous Risso's Dolphins, and an energetic solo Bottlenosed Dolphin that played on our bow and in our wake. The birdiest point of our day came near Atlantis Canyon, just at the margin of the cooler water. Here there were 7 or more Fin Whales feeding along with hundreds of Great Shearwaters. We chummed these right into the boat and had great looks at the squabbling Great Shearwaters fighting over beef suet, along with an incredibly cooperative Manx Shearwater.

The trip back in was marked by two first-summer Long-tailed Jaegers that Captain Joe pursued for great looks, along with another Basking Shark and a Mola mola. Our trip totals were as follows:

Great Shearwater 726 (MA & RI waters)

Cory's Shearwater 14 (two confirmed to be of expected borealis subspecies) (MA & RI waters)

Cory's/Great Shearwater 5

Manx Shearwater 6 (MA waters)

black-and-white shearwater sp. 1, probable Manx (MA & RI waters)

Wilson's Storm-Petrel 613 (MA & RI waters)

LEACH'S STORM-PETREL 45 (MA & RI waters, with most in Massachusetts)

Northern Gannet 1 (MA waters)

Herring Gull 1 (MA waters)

Great Black-backed Gull 1 (MA waters)

tern sp. 1 (MA waters)

Pomarine Jaeger 1 immature (MA waters)

LONG-TAILED JAEGER 2 first-summer (MA waters on return trip)

passerine sp. 1 possible Cedar Waxwing (MA waters)

(Offshore) Bottlenosed Dolphin – 1 (MA waters)

Risso's Dolphin - 25, three pods (MA & RI waters)

Fin Whale – 9 (MA waters)

whale sp. - 2 (one possible Sperm Whale) (RI waters)

WHALE SHARK – 1 (RI waters)

TIGER SHARK - 1, eating suet in our chum slick (MA waters)

BASKING SHARK – 2

Blue Shark – 1, maybe seen by Todd McGrath only

ATLANTIC MANTA - 2, of the brown form

Mola mola - 1

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE – 1 large animal (MA waters)

Portuguese Man O'War - 16+

EBIRD LISTS: Importantly, the leaders kept detailed bird lists for every half-hour period of the day, providing a detailed snapshot of where and when the pelagic life was occurring relative to geography and water conditions. These lists have been submitted to eBird and we can share these detailed lists, or a single list for each state's waters, for the entire day to anyone who would like copies of those lists. Whether you already have an eBird account or not, this checklist sharing process can copy these lists to your account, and once there, you can modify them as needed to reflect the birds that you did or didn't see at various points during the trip. To receive copies of those lists, please email me and tell me if you'd like the detailed lists, summary list, or both. Please provide either an eBird username (preferred) or an email address. (The eBird username is the name you use to log in to eBird with; if you don't have an account yet, just provide an email address).

PHOTOS: As always, many photographers aboard got incredible images (check out the shots of Keith Mueller's decoys, as well as the great live animals). Just a sampling would include:

Luke

Seitz: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/grallaria/sets/72157627100175143/with/5951250934/>

Ryan Schain: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ryser915/sets/72157627220853676/>  
[includes some of Steve's narration... "Look at the size of this thing!"]

Jeremiah

Trimble: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jrtrimble/sets/72157627107533369/>

And mine: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/miliff/sets/72157627237237868/>

Thanks as always to the Brookline Bird Club for organizing and running this trip. In particular, Naeem Yusuff and especially Ida Giriunas deserve our thanks for their roles in making this trip a success. The captain Joe Huckemeyer and first mate Matt deserve special recognition as well for their superb boat driving, excellent help chumming, and overall incredibly hard work and professional approach to these trips.

Best,

Marshall Iliff