

BBC Extreme Pelagic
September 24 and 25, 2016
Report by Sabrina Hepburn

Leaving Hyannis under overcast skies, approximately 40 participants onboard the Helen H braved up to 8-foot seas and winds of 5 to 15 knots for the Brookline Bird Club's second-ever September extreme pelagic trip. Although conditions were increasingly rough on the first day of the trip, as the boat headed around Nantucket and south across Nantucket Shoals towards Welker Canyon, the sharp eyes of the leaders and participants and the skill of the Captain produced some real highlights. Nantucket Shoals had good numbers of migrating scoters for this time of year, with water temperatures in the 60s, and the boat picked up a flock gulls off the stern around the chum, which brought in an adult Lesser Black-backed gull and produced a good jaeger show. This afforded early and impressive comparisons of actively chasing parasitic and long-tailed jaegers, close in to the boat.

Continuing across the Shoals, we also began some storm-petrels, both Leach's and Wilson's. This area of the Shoals also produced some of the first shearwaters (Cory's, Great, and smaller numbers of Sooty) for the trip and ten black terns. As morning progressed, we spent some extra time slowing down and birding in the rips at the edge of Shoals, finding large numbers of Red-Necked Phalaropes with a few Red Phalaropes mixed in, challenging observers to pick out these slightly larger, paler birds. Meanwhile, a juvenile kittiwake with the phalarope flock provided a bit less challenge, and two fly-by Pomarines rounded out the jaeger triumvirate for the trip. Non-avian fauna in the Shoals on the first day included Humpback Whale.



Red and Red-Necked Phalaropes, Nantucket Shoals 9/24/16. Photo by Peter Flood.

Around 11:30 am, the boat left Nantucket Shoals, heading offshore and into around 70-degree waters. Very soon one of the stars of the trip came in, a subadult South Polar Skua that provided stunning looks and photos as it circled the boat and came in for the chum. More Cory's and Great Shearwaters, Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers, and Leach's and Wilson's Storm-Petrels were seen as the boat continued to motor east out towards continental shelf. A bit farther out, three Audubon's Shearwaters were picked up here in about, for some of the later Massachusetts state records of this species.



Great Shearwater, Nantucket Shoals, 9/24/16. Photo by Peter Flood.

At around 2 pm we began approaching the edge of Welker Canyon and began an oil drip, spotting more shearwaters, Wilson's Storm-Petrels and Risso's Dolphins. In Welker Canyon we came across a truly spectacular whale shark that put on a show right off the side of the boat, one of the top experiences of the trip. For one of the rarest and most bizarre experiences, an adult wood duck flew by far offshore, which turned out to be one of three offshore wood ducks over the course of this trip. It was surreal to see this highly freshwater species motoring along way out to sea.

In the late afternoon in Welker Canyon we put out a good chum slick, attracting numbers of Wilson's and a few Leach's Storm-Petrels. At this point, we began a serious lookout for White-faced Storm-Petrel and were rewarded with four! Although challenging conditions made it difficult to stay on the birds, most on board got close looks. The last in the fading light was just 75 feet off the bow.



White-faced Storm-Petrel, Welker Canyon, 9/24/16. Photo by Peter Flood.

On Day 2 of the trip, we made our way north through Hydrographer's Canyon and the Continental Shelf in rough seas, continuing to see smaller numbers of Wilson's Storm-Petrels, and Great and Cory's Shearwaters along the way, including three more Long-tailed Jaegers in the morning. Highlights of the second day included a cooperative light morph Northern Fulmar that was seen by well by those onboard.