

First Occurrence of Greater Shearwater in Ontario

David Brewer, Barry Kent MacKay, Wendy Hunter and
Paloma Plant

On 20 August 1997, a member of the public found an exhausted bird on the Lake Ontario shore, at Budapest Beach, in the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario. The bird was given to fairground staff, who passed it on to Wendy Hunter and Paloma Plant, of the Wildlife Department of the Toronto Humane Society. They, in turn, contacted Barry Kent MacKay, who confirmed from their verbal description that the bird did, indeed, match the description of a Greater Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*).

When the bird was brought to MacKay late in the evening of 20 August, it was obviously ill beyond all help, being moribund and barely capable of movement. It was, therefore, euthanized that evening. Photographs of the body were taken two days later, when cloud cover dispersed, allowing good light, and the bird was shown to David Brewer.

The bird was prepared as a study skin by MacKay, and is now in the Royal Ontario Museum (specimen number 159988). Fat was nil, body entirely emaciated, stomach empty, and oil gland dry. Sex was male; testes measured 4.5 X 4.0 mm. The weight of the bird, record-

ed upon its arrival at the Toronto Humane Society, was 390 g. Adult birds in good condition weigh about 715 to 950 g (Cramp and Simmons 1977). Since the specimen was in hand, no notes were taken of plumage; however, detailed notes of soft part colours, which change on preservation, were attached to the specimen. The identity of the bird was clearly established by its very large size, distinct capped appearance, and dark belly patch (see Figures 1 and 2). The record was accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee as the first occurrence for Ontario (Dobos 1998).

Discussion

Aside from a single breeding record from the Falkland Islands (Woods 1988), the Greater Shearwater nests exclusively in the Tristan da Cunha group in the South Atlantic (AOU 1998). After breeding in the southern summer, adults and juveniles migrate, apparently in a northwestern direction, past the horn of Brazil, moving offshore from the Carolinas in late May or June, New England somewhat later, and as far north as the Davis Strait by July or August, before heading across the North

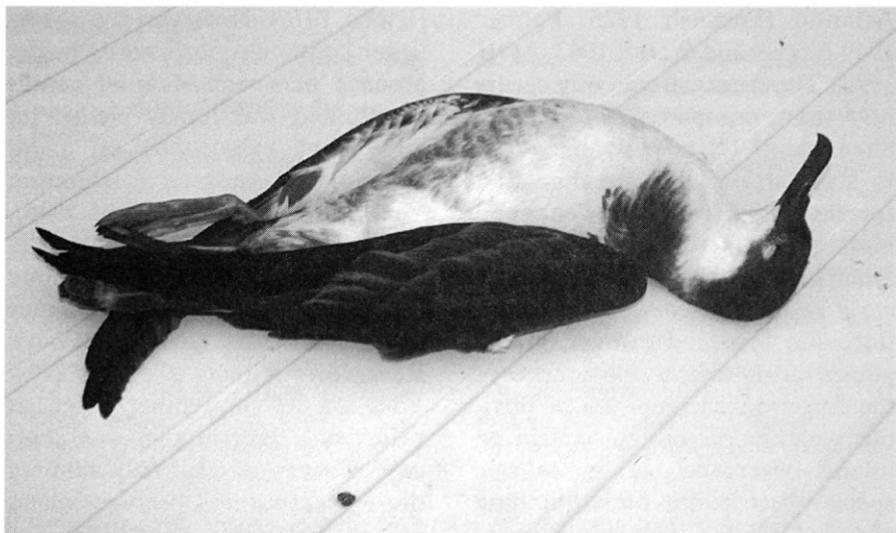


Figure 1: Greater Shearwater, 22 August 1997, Toronto, Ontario. Photo by *Barry Kent MacKay*.

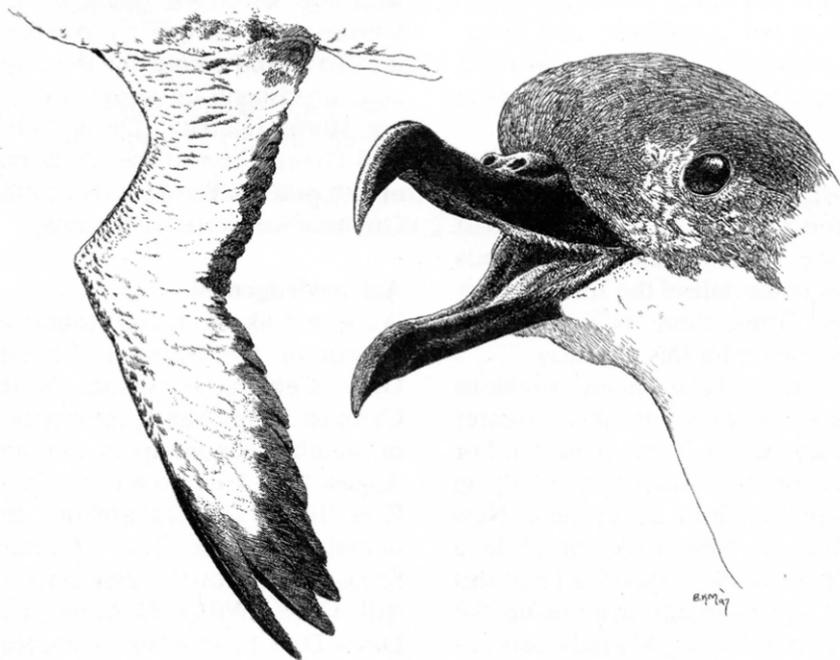


Figure 2: Greater Shearwater. Drawing by *Barry Kent MacKay*.

Atlantic (Forbush 1925, Palmer 1949, Voous and Wattel 1963, AOU 1998). The species frequently occurs in the company of Sooty Shearwaters (*P. griseus*), but tends to stay farther offshore than that species. "Wrecks" of weakened birds occur on the eastern North American seaboard, sometimes as early as June, when weather conditions are severe. However, in the period prior to the appearance of the Toronto bird, there was no obvious weather pattern to explain an inland occurrence of an oceanic species (according to storm data supplied by the National Climate Data Center, Asheville, NC). Hurricane Danny (a Category 1 storm) was active from about 16 to 26 July, but its influence was entirely confined to the Gulf of Mexico, where the Greater Shearwater does not occur.

There were no unusual inshore concentrations of Greater Shearwaters recorded on the eastern coast of the United States and Canada prior to the date of the Toronto specimen. Thus, there is no obvious explanation for this vagrancy.

There have been previous inland records of the Greater Shearwater in North America. For example, one was observed flying up the Hudson River near New Baltimore, New York, on 14 June 1976. It was later theorized that this bird was "partially assisted up the Hudson by strong S. winds associated with a storm off Long Island"

(Kibbe 1976). However, the shearwater continued northward "in the absence of severe weather conditions", and was finally picked up alive (but exhausted) on Lake Champlain near Burlington, Vermont on 17 June (Kibbe 1976). It became the second Vermont specimen after it died on 19 June (Askildsen 1998). Another Greater Shearwater was seen at Alcove Reservoir, Albany County, New York on 23 September 1989, as "Hurricane Hugo's rain was abating" (Paxton et al. 1990). One of these shearwaters observed inland at Sandersville (northeast of Macon), Georgia on 14 and 15 July 1997 "could not fly and later died, with the specimen going to the University of Georgia"; it "provided the 3rd inland record for the state, and, surprisingly, its occurrence was not storm related" (Davis 1997). This Georgia record was about one month prior to the discovery of the Greater Shearwater at Toronto.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Robert A. Magan of the National Climate Data Center, Asheville, North Carolina for providing information on weather conditions in July and August 1997. We also want to thank Ron Tozer for researching the inland records of Greater Shearwater, with the assistance of Bill Crins, Willie D'Anna, Phil Davis, Dick Ferren, Jim Flynn, Jean Iron, Ron Pittaway, and Sy Schiff.

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David Brewer, R.R. 1, Puslinch, Ontario N0B 2J0

Barry Kent MacKay, 60 Crandall Drive, Markham, Ontario L3P 6L2

Wendy Hunter, Wildlife Department, Toronto Humane Society, 11 River Street, Toronto, Ontario M5A 4C2

Paloma Plant, Wildlife Department, Toronto Humane Society, 11 River Street, Toronto, Ontario M5A 4C2