

In retrospect, evidence is mounting that the Black-browed Albatross is an occasional visitor to the western North Atlantic. Yet, it is indeterminate whether recent sightings indicate a range extension of this species or a reflection of vastly growing interest and familiarity with pelagic birds.

During the last century, the Black-browed Albatross has been observed or collected in the eastern North Atlantic on 25 or more occasions. One individual spent the "summers" of 1860-94 with a Gannet colony in the Faeroes north of Britain and apparently associated with the Gannets throughout the year (see R. C. Murphy, Oceanic Birds of South America, page 511).

Aside from a bird collected off the west coast of Greenland in August, 1935 (which justifies this species' inclusion in the A.O.U. Check-list), the Black-browed Albatross has recently been reported several times in the western North Atlantic:

June 28, 1972: Off Bird Island, Massachusetts, two birds, the first United States sighting (American Birds, October, 1972, 832).

August 19, 1972: South of Morehead City, North Carolina, two birds (American Birds, August, 1973, 739).

Summer of 1972: Four other sightings of albatrosslike birds. July 13, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; mid-July, two birds 100 miles east of Manasquan Inlet, New Jersey (questionable); early August, two birds 45 miles east-southeast of Manasquan (questionable); August 19, between Bar Harbor, Maine, and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. (American Birds, August, 1973, 740).

July 5, 1973: An adult Black-browed Albatross was reported off Brielle, New Jersey; the lone observer unsuccessfully attempted to photograph the bird.

Keith Shackleton and Ted Stokes state in their book, Birds of the Atlantic Ocean, page 27, "All albatrosses are, to a certain extent, wandering birds and some cover enormous mileages. The frequent -- nine within the last seventy years -- suggest that this species wanders well north when not engaged on family matters." The range map in this book confines the Black-browed Albatross to the eastern Atlantic, east of the Azores but up to 50° north latitude.

As defined by W. B. Alexander (Birds of the Ocean, second edition, page 11), the range of this species is "Southern Oceans between 60° S. and the tropic of Capricorn. Breeds on islets off Cape Horn, Staten I., South Georgia, the Falkland Is., Kerguelen, the Auckland Is., Macquarie I., Campbell I., Antipodes I., and Ildefonso I., Chile."

A note of caution should be introduced here. I question, for example, the ability of even the most experienced observer to distinguish the various albatross plumages at distances up to one mile (as reported by Paul G. DuMont in American Birds, August, 1973, 739). In fact, even at the close range at which I saw my bird, the distinguishing field marks (such as bill color) were not conspicuous. Only by careful inspection during a rather extended period (10 minutes) was I sure of the field marks -- especially considering the rarity of the bird!

I hope that potential observers, now aware of the possibility of sighting albatrosses in New England waters, exercise good judgment in identifying these and other unusual birds. There is a large amount of literature concerning plumages of albatrosses, which should be read thoroughly before making an identification of these birds. Only by positive identification will any trends in the range extension of such species (if such exist) become evident.

ATTENTION FEEDER USERS!

We must always have the welfare and safety of our birds in mind. There are feeders with a section for suet held behind wire. The idea seems good, but during winter a bird can be blinded when it reaches through the wire to the suet. The eyeball can become frozen by coming in contact with the wire. Plastic wiring or mesh (such as around onions or frozen turkeys) do away with the hazard.

Cardboard frozen-orange-juice cans, filled with a mixture of suet and seed and hung from a branch, make excellent winter feeders for chickadees and other small birds.

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