

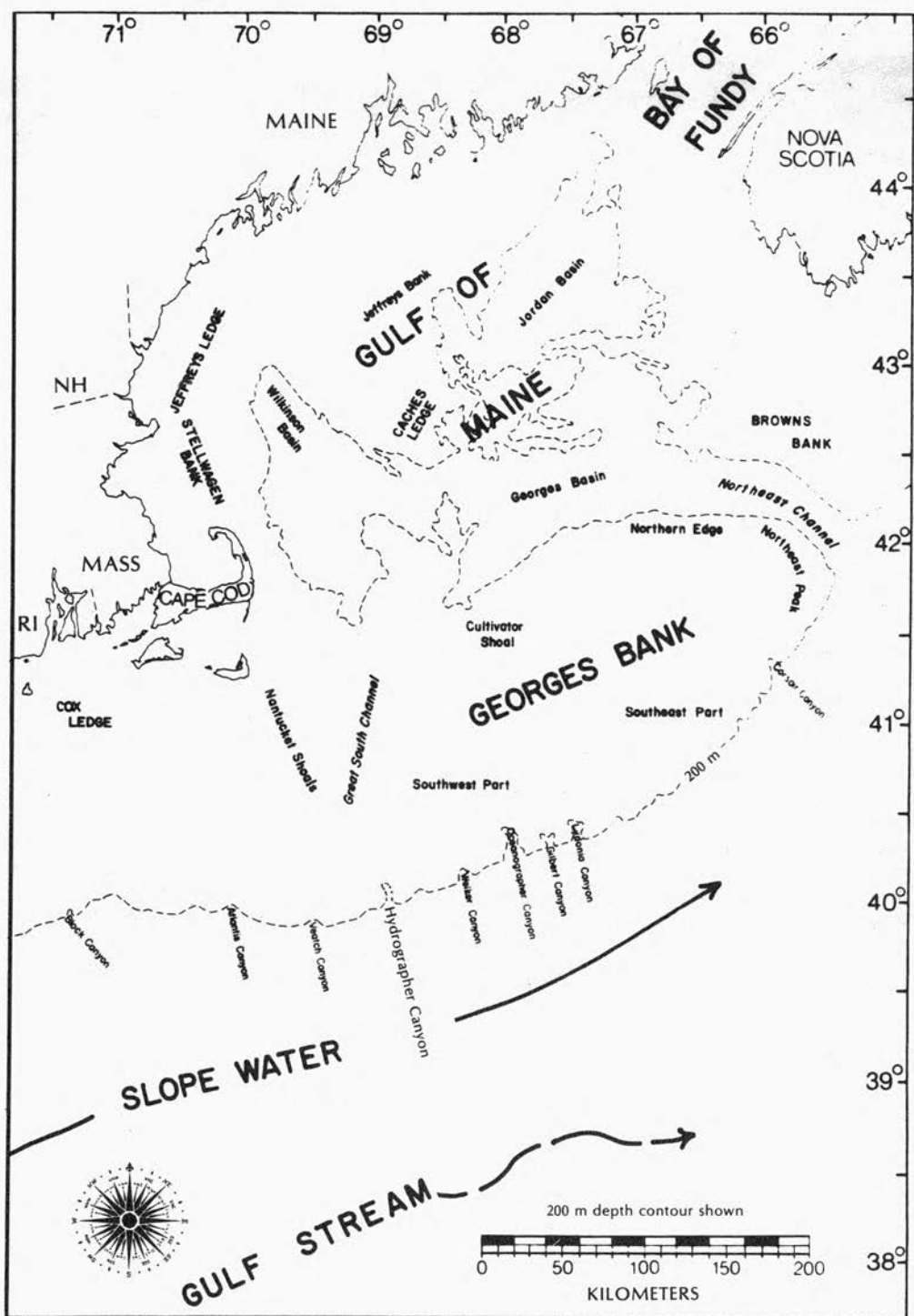
WHERE WE WENT: PELAGIC TRIP TO GEORGES BANK
SUNDAY TO TUESDAY, 21-23 AUGUST 1983

by George W. Gove, Winchester

Forty-two birders plus the crew of the "Yankee Cpts." left Gloucester at seven P.M. on Sunday evening headed for Georges Bank and Hydrographer Canyon. We sailed with a beautiful sunset and a nearly full moon on a warm and exceptionally clear night. We were assigned bunks by a random lottery process in three compartments below. The first compartment was about midships and got all of the engine noise and traffic to the other compartments; the second was forward and was probably the best as there was minimal noise, and it was well ventilated; the third was all the way forward in the bow and was probably a little cramped. There were fourteen bunks in the middle compartment arranged perpendicular to the keel in two- and three-high stacks. Bunks in the other two compartments were arranged both parallel to and perpendicular to the hull. We all stowed our gear in our assigned bunks and then went on deck to leave Gloucester.

After we had been out a couple of hours, we had an orientation program conducted by Dick Veit (birds and hydrogeography) and Wayne Petersen (whales, food items, and related topics) that was extremely well done. Both these leaders deserve much praise for the organization and conduct of the trip. It was difficult to hear the program over the engine noise, but this problem was solved the next night by cutting the engines to idle. [Another solution, for the future, would be to hold the orientation program on shore in the afternoon before the start of the trip.] After the program, most of us hit the sack and slept fitfully. Most people were up again by five A.M. in time to witness a beautiful sunrise preceding an equally beautiful day.

We didn't see many birds at the start, only an occasional Wilson's Storm-Petrel, a species that proved to be the most abundant during the entire trip. How many of these birds are offshore here is certainly open to conjecture, but it is probably safe to say that there must be many thousands. When we got over the canyon, we put out a slick of fish oil and suet chum; where there had been a few dispersed Wilson's Storm-Petrels, there were now a hundred or more, and they moved in very quickly. A few other birds also moved in, but the majority were Wilson's, so we moved to another location to lay out another slick. While moving from the first site to the next, a whale blow thought to be that of a Sperm Whale was spotted, and this caused considerable excitement. Indeed, it did prove to be a Sperm Whale, a "life" mammal for most of us. Also along here we sighted Risso's Dolphin (Grampus griseus), another "lifer" for most of us.



When we got to the second location and put out the chum, again Wilson's Storm-Petrels came out of nowhere and flew up and down the slick, stopping to feed by pattering along the surface and even standing on the water for a few moments with their wings outstretched but scarcely flapping. The yellow webs of their feet could easily be seen as they dangled their long legs and danced on the water. It was at this point that a lighter bird was noted among the feeding storm-petrels, and Benton Basham called out "White-faced Storm-Petrel" for the 680th species of his quest for "703 in '83." Everyone aboard got a good view of the bird as it hopscotched along the water and flew with stiff wingbeats much like a Spotted Sandpiper. We found and re-found this bird several times so that everyone had a chance to see it in good light. Much to our surprise, we sighted a White-faced Storm-Petrel (Frigate Petrel), the same or another bird, at another location later in the day. Needless to say, the bird was a life bird for most of us.

The rest of the day was spent moving from one location to another seeing many birds and mammals. Among the whales were the aforementioned Sperm Whale and Grampus Dolphins plus Pilot Whales, Finbacks, and Bottle-nosed Dolphins. We also saw two Hammerhead Sharks, Basking Shark, Ocean Sunfish, and Swordfish. We traveled over the canyon out to the one thousand-meter depth, and the most common bird was Wilson's Storm-Petrel. Among other seabirds sighted were Cory's, Greater, Manx, and Audubon's shearwaters, the one or two White-faced Storm-Petrels, Leach's Storm-Petrels, Pomarine Jaeger, Common and Black terns, a few Great Black-backed and Herring gulls, and both Red and Red-necked phalaropes. Shorebirds seen included a Whimbrel flying in a northerly direction, Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plover, and Solitary and Baird's sandpipers. The land birds flying there included Northern Waterthrush, Eastern Kingbird, and Tree Swallow.

In the evening we headed north, and Wayne went over what we had seen that day as well as parts of the previous night's program; the engines were cut so this time we could all hear. We then collapsed in our bunks, fatigued from the long day and all the excitement, while the boat continued northward on automatic pilot. At about three A.M., we anchored somewhere in Great South Channel southeast of Nantucket Shoals until about seven A.M. We had heard a weather forecast that night predicting a front coming through and expected rain and wind, but it didn't materialize, and we awoke to a gentle rocking and overcast skies. In fact, falling asleep that night had been like being gently rocked in a cradle, and I had slept "like a log" as did most of the others. As we started north Tuesday morning, the skies gradually cleared, and a fresh northwest wind came up which made for choppy four- to eight-foot seas but not really very rough in that size boat. By afternoon, we were in the lee of Cape Cod, and the seas calmed; from Provincetown to Gloucester, the sea was as calm as glass, and the day was warm and sunny.

Birds were generally scarce on the northerly leg to Provincetown, although we saw the ever present Wilson's Storm-Petrels and encountered several flocks of feeding terns and other birds, highlights of which were Leach's Storm-Petrel, Manx, Audubon's, and Sooty shearwaters, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, and Roseate and Black terns. We also encountered schools of fish, located by the boat's fish-finder, and the crew stopped to catch a number of cod and a couple of bluefish. We had the cod for supper in a delicious chowder. It is appropriate here to say that the crew was very solicitous of our wants, particularly in chasing and finding birds and mammals, and the boat was very clean and in good shape when we boarded. The crew and the quality of the boat contributed immensely to the success of the trip. We had the free run of the boat, and the crew was always ready to answer any questions.

Around Provincetown and in Cape Cod Bay, we encountered several large flocks of feeding terns, including many Roseates, and schools of feeding bluefish. We also saw from twelve to twenty Humpback Whales who put on quite a show breaching, flipper-slapping, lobtailing, and diving. A few individuals were identifiable by their fluke patterns. We sailed into Gloucester and the Annisquam River about seven P.M., dead tired but completely happy with the success of our venture.

GEORGE W. GOVE, an environmental biologist by profession, is an enthusiastic and expert shore birder regularly sighted at Plum Island and along the north shore. He is a member of Nuttall Ornithological Club and has worked as a member of the Records Staff of BOEM since 1981.

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