

The overall dusky plumage of the bird in August's photo, its white rump and stubby bill with a dorsal swelling and hooked tip immediately distinguish it as a storm-petrel, a member of a diverse order of seabirds known as Procellariiformes.

Points to notice when identifying storm-petrels are general shape and proportions, extent and configuration of the rump patch, wing shape, color tone, and flight characteristics. Certain definitive identification characteristics are readily evident in the photo, most important of which is the gleaming white, unbisected rump patch that covers the entire rump and extends around onto the sides of the tail, almost to the undertail coverts. In addition, the pictured storm-petrel's wings are rather short and rounded on the leading edge and straight on the trailing edge. Together these features clearly indicate that the mystery bird is a Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*).

Leach's, the other common storm-petrel in the northwest Atlantic, is longer winged with an obvious carpal bend that gives a nighthawklike shape to the wing. Likewise, the whitish rump patch of Leach's is normally divided vertically by a dusky streak, and the white never extends around onto the flanks and undertail coverts. The tail configuration is the only ambiguous feature in the photograph. Typically, the tail of Leach's Storm-Petrel has a shallow notch at the end, a feature that can be difficult to observe in the field. By contrast, Wilson's Storm-Petrel has a shorter and more rounded tail, and in sustained flight the bird's feet extend beyond the tail tip, a feature not shared by the longer-tailed Leach's. The impression in the photograph of a notched tail is due to furling or keeling of the tail in flight. Observers are cautioned that this occurs often under field conditions at sea.



Leach's Storm-Petrel and its bounding, erratic flight is seldom seen in Massachusetts waters away from Georges Bank and the continental shelf edge. On the other hand, Wilson's Storm-Petrel with its skimming, swallow-like flight, butterflylike hovering, and "walking on the water" behavior can be observed on most summer pelagic trips to Stellwagen Bank and inshore fishing grounds.

*Photo by A. H. Morgan
Courtesy of MAS*

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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