

## NOT A HAG AT ALL

Mariners from bygone days called this bird "sea hag." Was it named for the appearance of its plumage during molt or for the bird's ragged, badly worn feathers after months of pelagic wanderings? Or perhaps it was the bird's tuneless voice as it haggled over fish offal discarded by the boats on the Grand Banks. Whatever the derivation may be, its common name shearwater seems more appropriate for this graceful, buoyant species whose evolution has made it solidly adapted to an oceanic environment so vast, the unknowing may look upon it as an avian desert.



Greater Shearwaters breed in the South Atlantic Ocean on three tiny islands (the Nightingale and Inaccessible islands of the Tristan da Cunha group and on Gough Island 225 miles to the south), comprising in combined area less than 38 square miles. From here, just east of the midpoint between southern Africa and South America, about four million of these oceanic gypsies disperse northward in a transequatorial clockwise migration that carries them as far north as southern Greenland.

Recognized by its stiff-winged glides and shallow, rapid wingbeats, the Greater Shearwater is able to take advantage of the slightest updraft off the face of a rolling swell. After rising a few meters above the surface of a calm sea, it tips and glides downward in a wide circle, shearing the fluid plain from time to time with its wing tips, displaying the behavior that gives this nomad its name.

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**Addendum.** The word "hag," for which Merriam-Webster's *International Unabridged* supplies several diverse meanings, has its origins in Old English—*haegtesse* ("harpy" or "witch") and *haga* ("hedge"). In modern British dialect the word is used as a verb meaning to *hack*, *chop*, or *hew*, and as a noun to mean a *hedge*, *woods*, *enclosed field*, or *notch*—this last use stemming from *hagga* in Old Norwegian meaning a "chop" or "stroke" as of a sword. Thus, "shearwater" is an inversion of the old name "sea hag" and describes the bird's habit of flight.

The Greater Shearwater pictured here was photographed by the author in July 1985 off Chatham.