# FIELD NOTES

## South Polar Skua

*Peter Trull,* Wild Cape Cod

While most people have been complaining about this dismal summer, I've been loving the easterlies that have been hammering Cape Cod for what seems like over a month. If you don't know already, the day to go on a whalewatch to see pelagic species is during, or the day after, east or northeast winds; the snottier the weather, the better.


This has been the best year in memory for observing and photographing Parasitic and Pomerine jaegers on Stellwagen Bank. They have been thick, both species seen frequently in twos and threes. On July 17, a dark phase South Polar Skua (*Stercorarius maccormicki*) came over the boat, looking down, glancing around, and as I said out loud to myself "Look at this nice big" the word "Pom" turned into "Whoa, Skua"! It circled the boat twice, clearly looking here and there, like we had fish guts on board, and then b-lined east, out of sight. Wow. I called Blair Nikula at work, from sixteen miles off shore. I was so pumped. On that day, I observed the skua, two adult Arctic Terns sitting on a floating board, 7,000 Greater Shearwaters, 4,500 Sooty Shearwaters, 1,500 Wilson's Storm-Petrels, and three Northern Gannets.

Two weeks later on July 31, with winds from the east, I observed twenty Parasitic Jaegers (six visible at once in a flock of terns around 3 p.m.) and five Pomarine Jaegers, one beating up seriously on a Herring Gull that was making more noise than you ever hear a Herring Gull make! But the skua was the highlight of my summer whalewatch research trips. I've only been out thirty-seven times this year; according to my data sheets, my last August 15 trip was number 1,055 in ten years at the Center for Coastal Studies. So if you want to see pelagic birds from a whalewatch boat, pick a misty, foggy, nasty day with an east wind. The birds are blown in, land disappears quickly, and you might even see a whale.

P.S. Go for Sabine's Gull between September 1 and 12, on or after an easterly blow.

*(Editor's note: This may be the first sighting of a South Polar Skua from Stellwagen Bank.)*

# Nocturnal Foraging by Common Nighthawks

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During a study of Common Nighthawks (*Chordeiles minor*) in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1999, I made some incidental observations of nocturnal foraging. Specialization of the nighthawk's eye limits foraging to dusk and dawn under most natural conditions (Aldridge and Brigham 1991, Brigham and Fenton 1991). Unlike Whip-poor-wills (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) (Mills 1986) and Common Poorwills (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) (Brigham and Barclay 1992), nighthawks do not forage in moonlight (Aldridge and Brigham 1991), and diurnal foraging by nighthawks is considered rare (Brigham and Fenton 1991).

Nighthawks are known to feed on insects attracted to artificial light (Sheilds and Bildstein 1979, Poulin et al. 1996), which should enable them to forage throughout the night, but this has not been investigated. The current literature states that this species does not forage nocturnally (Poulin et al. 1996).

On ten nights, between July 2 and August 19, 1999, a total of twenty-one instances of nocturnal foraging by at least three different individuals were observed. Observations were made from the roof of a five-story apartment building on Huntington Avenue. Birds were identified by plumage characteristics as an adult male, adult female, and a hatch-year individual of undetermined sex. Foraging was identified when a bird ceased calling and made several erratic, fly-catching deviations in flight. For the purposes of this study, instances that occurred between 9:30 p.m. and 4:00 a.m. were considered nocturnal. The observed time spent foraging ranged from 12.5 to 2.0 minutes per night (average 5.7 minutes). The majority of the observed instances of nocturnal foraging ($n$=18/21) took place over Huntington Avenue, a well-lit urban street. All observed foraging bouts took place several meters above downward-oriented light sources.

For six nights the stadium lights were on at Fenway Park. During these nights, the area used by nighthawks for nocturnal foraging expanded to include areas away from Huntington Avenue. The stadium is 0.8 km from the study site. Although previously reported to forage in the light of Fenway Park during night baseball games (Levin 1993), no nighthawks were observed feeding there during this study. The lights were usually out by 11:00 p.m.

It is certain that some foraging could not be observed during the nights in question. However, these observations raise questions about Common Nighthawk

biology in urban habitats. The ability to use artificial light to extend foraging periods removes a natural constraint on Common Nighthawk foraging behavior. Consequently, the use of lighted, urban habitats to increase the time within which foraging is possible may be advantageous to this species.

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# Jack the Pelican

*Maura J. Amrich*

It would have been easier if Jack had been a Lark Bunting. A Lark Bunting, although just as geographically misplaced, would never have produced the type of comments I had to endure regarding my sanity, eyesight, and drinking habits when I announced the presence of an American White Pelican (AMWP) on Flint Pond, practically in my backyard. Since the average person has probably never heard of a Lark Bunting, they would never know where it should or shouldn't be. But a *pelican*? Everyone knows they are those big birds with the huge bills that you see along the coast of Florida and California, right? But there it was: an American White Pelican on a small pond in Tyngsborough, Massachusetts, forty miles from the nearest ocean.

I have no professional or educational training in the natural sciences, and to me birding is just a fun hobby. So this story simply represents my casual observations of a really cool yard bird, whom my children dubbed "Jack."

I discovered Jack just before 8:00 a.m. on April 15, 2000 (prompting me to

observe that never before has a "big bill" arriving on this date ever been so welcomed by so many!). Mass. Audubon was closed for the long Patriot's Day weekend so it wasn't until April 18 that I was able to get the word out to the birding community. Once I did, there was much excitement about Jack's presence, and birders from three states eventually visited my yard to see him (and to sign my daughter's guest book). They posted many observations to MASSBIRD, including the fact that Jack was missing his left eye.

Many people began doing their own research on AMWP sightings in Massachusetts, all trying to find where Jack had been before arriving in Tyngsborough. Because of their efforts, it can be assumed that Jack was the same right-eyed AMWP that was on a pond in Ellenville, Ulster County, NY, from March 18 until April 7, 2000. An AMWP also briefly touched down in Berkshire County, MA, during a snowstorm on April 9, 2000. In 1997, a single AMWP with a missing left eye was carefully documented as it eventually made its way to Plum Island, MA (July 13 Kingston, July 14 Hull, July18-19 Scituate – where the missing eye was first noted, Plum Island July 21-October 16). It's reasonably safe to assume that these sightings all pertained to the same individual. This list of occurrences is not intended to be inclusive, yet it represents those sightings most relevant to Jack's history.

There are several theories about why Jack appeared in Massachusetts, but all are subject to speculation. As to why Jack landed specifically on Flint Pond, my own theory is that he was lost, lonely and/or tired, and with his impaired eyesight, he noticed our local pair of Mute Swans and hoped they were kindred souls. After determining that it really was an AMWP on the pond, not an impaired swan as I originally thought, my first observations were simply aimed at trying to determine what our native waterfowl thought of this strange visitor with the huge bill. The Mallards and Canada Geese seemed completely unconcerned as they swam along next to Jack, just as if he'd always been present on the pond.

The Great Blue Herons seemed to act differently, however. My observations of Great Blues suggest that they take flight when frightened, and that normally they are very slow-moving birds (except of course when darting out their necks while fishing). So, when I saw Jack swimming along the shoreline to approach some feeding herons, I was surprised to see the herons run. This was most comical, since it was very different from their usual slow, stilted walk. Perhaps the herons were a little unsure, but not frightened enough to take wing. The herons soon got used to Jack, which ultimately led to my favorite Jack sighting. One morning, I looked out my sliding glass doors to see a Great Blue emerge from behind the cattails to an open area on our small beach. The heron was walking just a couple of feet out from shore, and right behind it was Jack. I could see Jack's big feet slowly paddling him along, as the two birds made their way along the shoreline and around the bend.

As to Jack's disposition, he seemed like an easy-going, laid-back individual. If boaters approached too closely, he'd just casually swim off, or continue to where he was going, sometimes passing quite closely. He did not seem to be people-shy (although certainly not tame), since he would sometimes swim right along the

shoreline unconcerned with the residents rushing to the shore to take photographs, nor did he appear too concerned when our dogs were down at the shoreline. He would even occasionally sleep on my neighbor's beach, at the end of their dock. Other than when chased by the swan, I recall seeing Jack fly off quickly only twice: each time he was approached suddenly and loudly by motorboats. Canoeists, on the other hand, were able to get quite close to him, since he just calmly kept a little ahead of them.

*Jack*

I had ample opportunity to watch Jack feed. He would typically swim along the edge of the pond, repeatedly dipping his bill in the water, tipping it back to drain the water, and sometimes tossing his head far back several times, which made me think he may have caught a large fish. Jack was not particularly active, but every few days he would fly back and forth several times across the length of the pond making repeated low sweeps just above the water. I don't know if this was to simply stretch his wings or an attempt to locate fish (a one-bird attempt at fish herding). Whatever the reason, it was a truly magnificent sight to watch this aerial display by a bird with a roughly ten-foot wingspan. I was fortunate to have been standing on the shoreline during several of these passes, so I had a wonderful view.

On April 26 we had a late snowstorm. I didn't bother to put out the guest book, since I figured no one would come in that weather. Although the snow didn't amount to much, there were times when it was quite heavy. Despite the weather Jack swam along the shore feeding in the morning, seemingly unperturbed, then later settled down by the cattail marsh. I felt a little crazy standing in my back yard in a slicker holding an umbrella over my head while watching a pelican in a snowstorm. But, apparently, I wasn't alone. Soon after I went in, my doorbell rang, and there was a gentleman asking if he could sign the guest book. So we wandered out into my backyard together to take advantage of this strange and unique opportunity to watch a pelican feeding in a small pond during a New England snowstorm. Birders are certainly a determined lot!

On May 3 Jack did something I had never seem him do before. Around 10:00 a.m. he took wing and kept climbing higher and higher in widening circles. Then when he was just a tiny spot in the sky, off he went heading northwest. I thought Jack was finally on his way home. Feeling a mixture of happiness that he would soon be with others of his kind and sadness that he had left my pond, I went in the house to post his departure to MASSBIRD. But, before I could press "send," Jack was back! I

felt, however, that this extended flight was a sign that he might soon be departing; perhaps he was getting his bearings and testing the winds. I later learned that this circling behavior was quite normal for flocks of AMWPs. The next morning Jack was still on the pond. However, when I returned from dropping my son at school, I was unable to locate him. During Jack's extended stay, it was rare that he couldn't be found somewhere on the pond. Even when he wandered into Flint Marsh, he would regularly return to the pond. So I thought my original guess was correct. Jack had left.

However, the story doesn't end here. On May 16 I went out just before dark to check on the swans (since the female swan had been missing for a few weeks and the male for several days, I was hoping that they might both be hiding in the marsh with young), when Jack came gliding in for a landing. It was amazing how he just suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and seemed to float down to the water without ever flapping his wings. I watched him feed rather furiously until it was too dark to see him.

I was able to watch Jack in all types of weather – sunny blue skies, sleet, snow, and on May 18 I watched him in a thunder-and-lightning storm. He stood out on his favorite perch, a submerged branch, surrounded by water with his neck craned toward the sky, making, in my opinion, a perfect lightning rod. I was relieved to still find him in good health the next morning. On May 22 Jack left again, but on May 23 he returned. I was out on the pond's shore and watched him gently float out of the sky for a landing. There had been no sightings of him during his first absence, even though there were birders wandering all over the state for the Mass Audubon's Bird-a-thon on May 12-13. This time, however, we did get reports of his wanderings. On May 22, soon after he left, he was seen east of Tyngsborough along the Merrimack River in Lowell, and the next day a call to Mass Audubon reported that he had been seen in Nashua, NH (just north of Tyngsborough).

Jack left again on May 25, this time for good. A posting to MASSBIRD reported a single AMWP in Freeville, NY, (near Ithaca) on May 28, and another sighting of a single pelican at Braddock Bay, Lake Ontario, NY, on May 30. While no mention was made of a missing left eye, it seems plausible to assume that the bird in question was Jack.

This ends my tale of "Jack the Pelican," at least part one of the saga. Part two is the story of how I first discovered Jack, what I went through to let the birding public know of his presence, my daughter's very popular guest book, the distances that so many wonderful people traveled to see Jack, the incredible knowledge these people shared with us, and what it's like to play host to a rare bird. Perhaps someday there will even be a sequel – the story of Jack's return! I don't know what you will be doing on April 15 next year, but I will be sitting in a lounge chair on my shoreline waiting for our gentle, great-winged friend to return, and maybe if I'm lucky, he'll bring a friend.