

# Looking Back . . . Clips from Massbird October 2002

## **Shearwater Grand Slam, Plum Island**

Thomas Wetmore

Wed, 2 Oct 2002

I checked for shearwaters from the lot one beach overlook at Plum Island this morning, at 6:30 and 8:00.

At 6:30 there were a few Greaters in the distance, about twenty birds. The haze was thick and visibility poor. I gave up and went land birding.

As I was leaving the refuge at 8:00, I decided, what the heck, check again. Glad I did. Though the numbers were down from the 1000s of recent days, there was a large flock of shearwaters around the area of the large red buoy to the northeast, and many birds were close enough in for identification. There were 300-400 birds, with often more sitting in the water than flying. The vast majority were Greaters. With little trouble I was able to identify two Cory's. One I followed until it landed in the water among some Greaters, and the difference in head markings and overall coloration were obvious. These birds were all close enough that the black caps on the Greaters were distinctive. There were also three Manx Shearwaters buzzing around in the same group, and the different flight pattern, coloration, and smaller size were clear. The grand slam was completed when a very dark, Sooty Shearwater, darted through and around the same group.

This was an unprecedented experience for me. This is my 21st year of birding Plum Island, and before this past summer I had never seen a shearwater of any species from the beach. Even on whale watches I don't remember seeing more than two species on any given trip. To whatever gods are up there smiling down, thank you.

## **WHY the Pelagics?**

Ian Rex

Thu, 3 Oct 2002

I got the scoop from a fishing friend. . . Pelagics are flocking close to land because "Pogie" fishing ban took effect recently. The pogies are being chased by Bluefin Tuna — generally the 150-300 lb weight class that run their food into shallow water. The pogie are reaching enormous numbers (way beyond the birds) that form schools the size of football fields and as the tuna compress the school, they gorge by "slashing" through with their dorsal topside half-way out of the water. Listen for tuna breaking the surface as they also leap up to eight feet out of the water. Time to go for pelagics... rain or shine!

## **WHY the Pelagics?**

Linda Pivacek

Thu, 3 Oct 2002

Ian, the fish and the birds have been tremendous since the beginning of September. The breeding season is over and to witness the southward migration and interaction of the fish and the birds has been awesome. The food chain is dramatically in evidence with the presence of top predators such as tuna, Peregrines, Merlins and man. I've been trying to determine the major components of the baitfish schools that I see from my house in Nahant. This has been the most active year I can remember. The baitfish are hitting the surface all over Nahant Bay and when chased by a predator several hundred break the surface into the air at once. The numbers of Laughing Gulls approach 1000. Striped Bass are plentiful and for the first time, from my deck overlooking the bay at Short Beach Nahant, I watched a pod of Bluefin Tuna "porpoising". I had researched local fishermen and even the Northeastern Marine Science Lab, and determined that most of the baitfish were Menhaden (Mossbunkers), and that the really small ones were called "Peanut Bunkers". I also heard that there were Smelt and Herring. I'd love to find out where to find more definitive information.


I've seen the baitfish — some are about 3 inches long and others are so tiny that Laughing Gulls can pick them out of the water and eat them like peanuts, about half to 1 inch. I watched Cormorant flocks "push" them ashore actually onto the sand into the waiting bills of the Herring Gulls.

## **Andrew's Point, Rockport Seawatch**

Richard Heil

Thu, 3 Oct 2002

(0650-1140,1200-1715 hrs.) Weather: Overcast; NW 10-15 mph went NE 10-20 by 1130, then E 10-20 by 1700; Infrequent light rain and mist; Visibility fair in A.M., very good in P.M. Spectacular concentrations of shearwaters continue, attracted to masses of schooling baitfish being pursued inshore and to the surface by large schools of predatory tuna. A short note in yesterday's Boston Globe, reported on these huge schools of immature Pogies (Atlantic Menhaden, *Brevoortia tyrannus*) and Atlantic Herring (*Clupea harengus*) which have been forced up into coves and onto beaches in southern Maine. This is clearly also the case here on the North Shore of Massachusetts. In the note, Bruce Joule of the Maine Dept. of Marine Resources points out that these movements appear to be part of their migration and that these schools of immature fish have appeared around September for about the past four or five years.

All day long there were thousands of shearwaters (and gannets) in view, milling in various directions, and frequently forming huge feeding aggregations very close to my position on the shore, many, many, often within a mere 200-400 meters from my position on shore, providing absolutely spectacular views of these feeding frenzies, each sometimes comprised of 500 or more birds. The flocks were so close I could hear the birds squabbling and make out the naricorns (tubes) on the bills. Today was also the first substantial scoter migration so far this season, though they were accompanied by an unusually diverse selection of dabbling ducks. Something odd about seeing a Wood Duck migrating with a flock of Surf Scoters passing through a mass of Greater Shearwaters! 



GREATER SHEARWATER BY DAVID LARSON

### **PIF to Release Landbird Continental Plan in November**

Partners in Flight (PIF) is close to finishing its North American Landbird Conservation Plan, based on an assessment of 448 breeding landbirds of the United States and Canada. This plan, which should appear next month, identifies 100 species on the new PIF Watch List, as well as 95 additional stewardship species restricted to a single major North American biome. For each of these 195 species of continental importance, the plan provides an estimate of population size, numerical population objective, recommended conservation action level, and specific monitoring needs . . . .

Together, these conservation actions across the continent will meet PIF's goal of "restoring and sustaining all of North America's native landbirds in healthy numbers across their natural ranges." The PIF plan calls upon decision-makers, land managers, researchers, and others working at national and international levels to help meet this goal.

[News from *The Birder Conservationist*, an ABA electronic newsletter, archived at: <<http://www.americanbirding.org/programs/constbc.htm>>.]