

Black-browed Albatross Sightings off the United States East Coast

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Sightings of Black-browed Albatrosses (*Diomedea melanophris*)—two on June 28, 1972, in Buzzards Bay, Mass., and two on Aug. 19, 1972, at sea south of Morehead City, N.C.—may be the first reports of this species near the United States. Plumage variations between Buzzards Bay and Morehead City birds—different neck and bill coloration, and differences in tail, underwing, and upper back pattern and coloration—suggest that four different birds were seen. More definitive field marks were noted on the Buzzards Bay birds because of stabler footing and closer viewing distance.

While at a 10-ft elevation on Bird Is. (41°40'N, 70°43'W) in Buzzards Bay at 5:30 p.m., J. J. Hatch and M. Conca watched 2 Black-browed Albatrosses through 10x binoculars for 5 minutes at 700-750 yds. Birds circled once, settled briefly on the water, then continued flying SSE. Herring Gulls, both flying and settled on water, provided direct size comparisons. Visibility was good despite a hazy sun, winds were southerly at 10 mph, and seas of less than 2 ft. had a small chop.

The albatross's body size was quite large compared to the gull, but the wingspread was less than twice the gull's wingspread. Wings were long and narrow. The upper wing and back were uniform grey-brown. Small, irregular, pale marks (not clearly seen) were thought to be on the mantle of one bird. The underwing surface was considerably paler than the upperwing and had a wide dark border around the entire wing edge, merging irregularly into a much lighter, but not pure white, innerwing stripe. Head, neck, lower back, rump, and uppertail areas, and entire undersides were white. The bill was large and uniformly pale, appearing flesh-colored with an orange tint. A dark mark near the eye and a

smudge on the nape (neither clearly seen at that distance) were thought to be present. The tail was small, and the distal area was gray-brown. The extent of white on lower back, rump, and uppertail areas was smaller than shown in figures by Alexander (1954) and Watson (1966), but was more consistent with photographs in Warham *et al.* (1966).

Hatch has seen Wandering and Royal albatrosses in New Zealand and albatrosses in the Galapagos Islands and is experienced with the commoner shearwater species of the western North Atlantic. Conca has little previous experience with "tubenoses" but agreed with main descriptive features of albatrosses.

While on a sport fishing boat Aug. 19, P. G. DuMont and seven other birders, using 7x, 8x, and 10x binoculars saw 2 "black-mantled" albatrosses on wing at a point (33°45'N, 76°44'W) 48 miles south of Morehead City intermittently between 9:30 and 9:45 a.m. Birds were found and lost several times as boat slowly cruised, then turned in circles, and finally stopped.

DuMont, R. L. Ake, G. S. Grant, and D. L. Johnson saw one or more birds well enough to confidently identify them as Black-browed Albatrosses. Only DuMont and Johnson saw both birds (but never together). E. LeGrande, H. LeGrande, S. H. Mudd, and R. A. Rowlett did not see enough field marks to separate these birds from other possible "black-mantled" albatrosses. Several impartial reviewers have expressed more confidence in the species identification of the Buzzards Bay birds than these Morehead City birds.

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DuMont noted minor plumage variations between the birds. Descriptions by several other observers varied enough to suggest they sighted both birds individually at different times. No direct size comparison was possible, but DuMont based his size evaluation in part on size appearances of several 6-man fishing boats (seen in another direction) that appeared to be about the same distance from observers. Distance-to-bird estimates varied among observers, generally $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 mile. Winds were light and southerly, skies were sunny, and seas were moderate with 2-ft. swells.

To DuMont, Ake, and Johnson, with previous albatross experience, birds were immediately suggestive of Laysan Albatrosses (there are no Atlantic Ocean records for this species), but to several others, birds were suggestive of huge Greater Black-backed Gulls that had short, slim bodies and long, narrow wingspans. The wing-length to body-length ratio was nearly 2.5:1. The back and upperwing surface was a solid, continuous grey-black (second bird was browner). The underwing had wide, blackish border around the entire wing edge, somewhat wider on the leading than trailing edge; the border contrasted sharply with the white innerwing stripe. The underwing color separation was rather clear-cut on one bird, and the stripe width was a little over half the wing width. On the other bird, separation was more jagged, even diffused, and its stripe width was less than half the wing width. Head, neck, lower back, rump, and upper tail areas, and entire undersides were white. The bill was large and noticeably deep compared to the head, and was uniformly colored—light-grey horn to a pale yellow horn, depending on the angle of view. Only Grant was sure he saw a blackish tail; others thought it was white, but only Ake specifically looked for the tail color.

Good numbers of Greater, Cory's, and Audubon's Shearwaters were well seen by all observers that day. DuMont, Ake, and Johnson have seen Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses in the Pacific and recognize the albatross flight style. These Black-broweds mixed gliding with an undulating soaring. Once DuMont noted one bird climb sharply upwards, arc on near vertically-held wings, then drop quickly into gliding again.

Six Southern Hemisphere albatrosses are generally all light-colored with dark backs and upperwings. Main separation features are size, head and bill colors, and the distribution of black and white in the underwing. Of the "medium-sized" albatrosses, only the Black-browed and Shy have uniformly pale bills. The latter has a

mostly white underwing with very narrow dark margins; there are no North Atlantic records for it. The Yellow-nosed Albatross's bill is black with a yellow ridge atop the upper mandible, the white on its underwing is intermediate between the Black-browed and Shy. The Black-browed's entire wing-back surface is usually uniformly colored; backs of the Yellow-nosed and Shy are somewhat lighter colored than their wings. The innerwing stripe of the underwing of the Yellow-nosed is fully white, while the stripe on the Black-browed apparently gets whiter with age. Of the three species, only the Black-browed has a thin, black eyeline mark

Heretofore, the only Black-broweds reported from western North Atlantic waters were singles taken off Greenland's west coast in August 1935 and off Martinique in the Caribbean in November 1956. Yet the Black-browed is the commonest vagrant albatross in the northern and eastern North Atlantic, with most of the 40-some specimens and sight records being from the British Isles. In contrast, the Yellow-nosed Albatross has been reported mostly in southern and western North Atlantic water, including 13 records along or off the U.S. coast; (McDaniel, 1973) it has yet to be recorded from the British Isles (Bourne 1967).

Four other sightings of albatrosses of unknown species or "albatross-like" or "sized" birds were reported off the U.S. East Coast during Summer 1972: July 13, one albatross (sp?) seen off Martha's Vineyard, Mass., by J.C.T. Nisbet, mid-July, two albatross-like birds seen flying 100 miles E of Manasquan Inlet, N.J., by nonbirders, early August, two albatross-like birds seen 45 mi. ESE of Manasquan by unidentified birders, Aug. 19, one albatross-sized bird on the water with a black mantle seen from the "Bluenose" ferry between Bar Harbor, Maine, and Yarmouth, N.S., by R. W. Smart. In addition, an adult Black-browed was seen Aug. 8, 1972, at Fife Ness, Scotland (F.R. Smith, *in litt*)

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