Robert Murphy's Minions

Ron Naveen

A most prestigious group: (left to right) Allan D. Cruickshank, Alexander Sprunt, Jr., Carl Bucheister (former president of Audubon), and Robert Cushman Murphy (then president of the National Audubon Society) in August 1939, in Muscongus Bay, Maine. Photo courtesy of Sandy Sprunt.

SEPTEMBER. WESTERN NORTH ATlantic Ocean. We are 60 miles offshore, southeast of Ocean City, Maryland, and just inside Virginia waters. It is partially sunny, with benign, southwest winds. Almost no one is seasick, and anticipation is running high.

There have been great pelagic trips this autumn both north, off Massachusetts, and south, off North Carolina and Georgia, with many sightings of rare storm-petrels, Bridled Terns, and juvenile jaegers. The talk on deck is so hopeful I fear that almost any "regular" pelagic, say a Wilson's Storm-Petrel or an Audubon's Shearwater, will be transmogrified into a hoped-for straggler or, worse, a new addition to the list of North American avifauna!

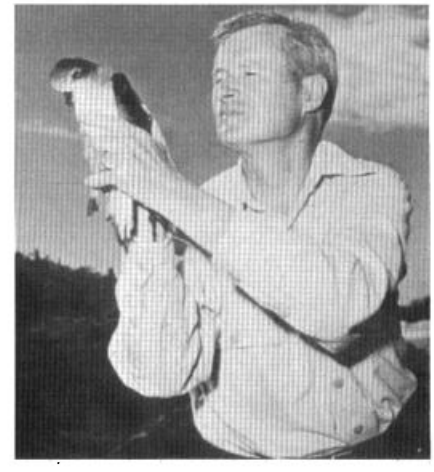
Just before high noon, the pace quickens: a few juvenile jaegers, one definite Leach's Storm-Petrel, and 35–40 splashing and cavorting Bottlenosed Dolphins appear. Hal Wierenga, one of the co-leaders, paces the upper deck intensely, looking for any indications of pelagics still-to-come. Seabird-dreams are twinkling in his consciousness, too. "They could be anywhere," he shouts, "we've *got* to keep looking!"

Down below, another co-leader and our official "score-keeper", Maury Barnhill, is talking ever-more feverishly into his tape recorder: "12:31, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, two. 12:32, Greater Shearwater, one. Large flock of storm-petrels ahead at 12 o'clock." Indeed, the storm-petrels come faster and more flittingly—and then, pandemonium hits.

"WHITE-FACED STORM-PETREL! WHITE-FACED STORM-PETREL! Dead ahead with the Wilson's and flying away from us," Hal screams at maximum decibels, as he jumps up and down, points forward, and exhorts everyone to lift binoculars to eyes.

In a frenzy reminiscent of Blue-footed Boobies attacking a shoal of baitfish, 49 ravenous birders rush to the bow to "have" (as the British would say) their White-faced Storm-Petrel. The rush forward proves fortuitous, because the White-faced does not linger. It speedily flies away from us, and there is no way that our vessel, the MARINER, can keep speed.

Soon, the White-faced is out-of-sight, gone, but certainly not forgotten. Smiling faces abound, accompanied by much back-slapping and loud, boisterous conversation. This may be one of those pelagic trips that is talked about for years, with the White-faced Storm-Petrel's aura growing with every successive recounting.



Murphy with a Cahow, the bird he discovered on the Bermuda Expedition in 1951. The bird had been thought extinct since 1625. Photo/American Museum of Natural History.

Murphy aboard the "Askoy" while on expedition in South America in 1941. Photo courtesy Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.

The air is rife with chatter of new checkmarks adorning lifelists, but my thoughts fixate on Robert Cushman Murphy, the late Curator of Oceanic Birds at the American Museum of Natural History, and the guru of seabirders worldwide. Murphy's life's work and writings, particularly *Oceanic Birds of South America,* continue to inspire and nurture participants of this peculiarly crazed ritual known as pelagic birding. Today, far offshore in the Western North Atlantic, Murphy's minions have carried the tradition forward, and with our White-faced Storm-Petrel, we have triumphed anew.

Murphy and seabirds. Intercoupled words that effortlessly roll off the tongue, almost without thought. Murphy has been on my mind even more than usual of late because 1986 marks the 50th anniversary of the first publication of his *magnum opus: Oceanic Birds of South America.* For those who regard Murphy as a culture hero, and seabirding as a vocational or avocational passion, and *Oceanic Birds* as a classic, this is a very special Golden Anniversary.

As president of the National Audubon Society from 1938–1940, Murphy always found time to talk to visiting schoolchildren. Here they are engrossed in a copy of Bird Lore, *a forerunner of* American Birds. *Photo courtesy of the National Audubon Society.*

At some point, every birder goes through a stage of hero worship. Audubon, Chapman, Coues, and Griscom are good choices to prop on a special pedestal, but for amateur or professional enthusiasts who have turned-on to the ocean and its creatures, there's almost no room in the pantheon for anyone but Robert Cushman Murphy.

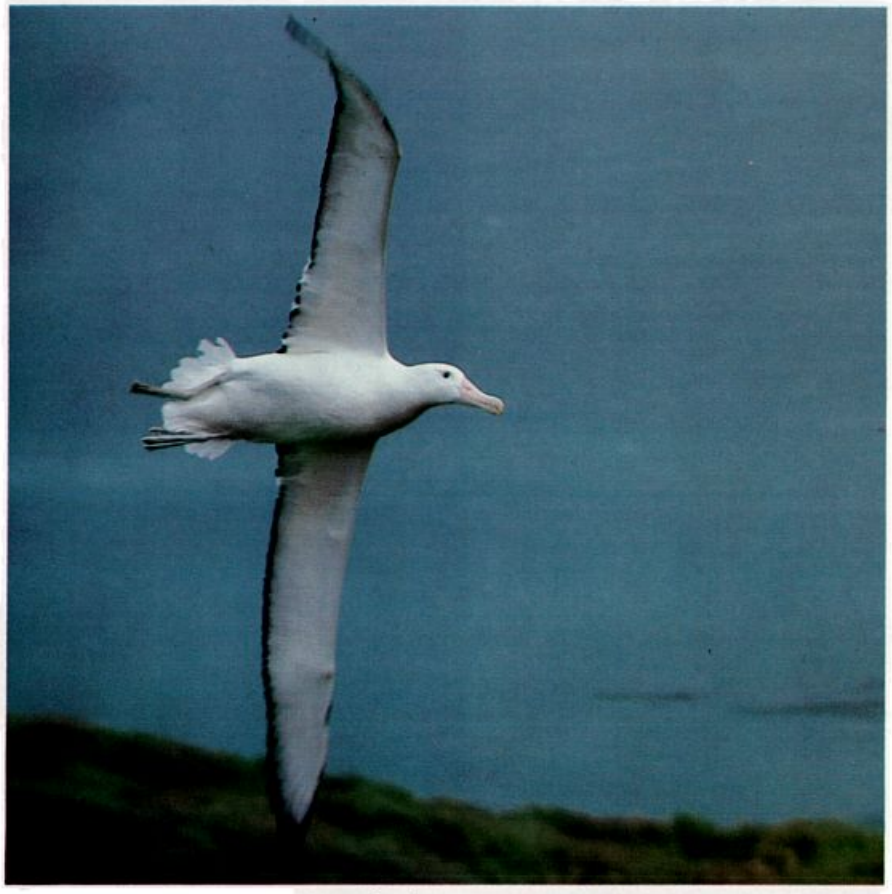
The lofty status is partly circumstantial. Murphy, the scholar, was "consulted" to fill a birder-oriented need, then, in a sense, "rediscovered" for his romantic, seabird storytelling.

The late 1960s and early 1970s brought a birder's revolution: increasing numbers of binocular-toters spent increasingly more dollars chasing life birds in more and more obscure locations, including the open ocean. Pelagic trips blossomed along all of North America's coastlines.

Yet, despite several new field guides for this growing audience, detailed information still was lacking about the identity, distribution, habits, and habitats of seabirds. Nothing was more frustrating than a long, rough, seasick day on the ocean, with the birds whizzing-by faster than even a good field birder's skills could keep up with correctly. On the rocking, rolling ocean, the diagnostic field marks mentioned in these field guides were oftentimes meaningless. The birds seemed too mysterious, and their lives and identification too difficult—until delving into Murphy.

His writings were eagerly sought and, in this primary source, birders found a motherlode of material about seabird identification, breeding biology, and feeding ecology, all of which were and are still remarkably accurate and relevant given the age of the publication. Murphy cracked many of the mysteries regarding a very difficult-to-identify and study group of birds; but, it was his prose that won the hearts and minds of a new generation of eager birders.

Murphy presents his seabirds' life histories memorably. To him these creatures are not simply objects of visual apprehension and cold, scientific analyses. Rather, they are fellow travelers



Wandering Albatross (Diomedea exulans) *swooping in for a landing on its nesting grounds. Albatross Island, South Georgia, February 1986. Photo/Ron Naveen.*

on this planet, worthy of long, respectful study, not mere passing glances. Between the covers of Murphy's classics (including *Bird Islands of Peru* [1925] and *Logbook for Grace* [1947]), an inquisitive reader can discover an impassioned writer and articulate seabirds connoisseur, who describes these ocean-going creatures in the most inspiring manner.

Murphy brings literary grace to topics like the effortless grace of an albatross on the wing, the seemingly anthropomorphic domestic life and rituals of penguins, the comical antics of displaying Wandering Albatrosses, and the rugged beauty of the South Georgian fjords.

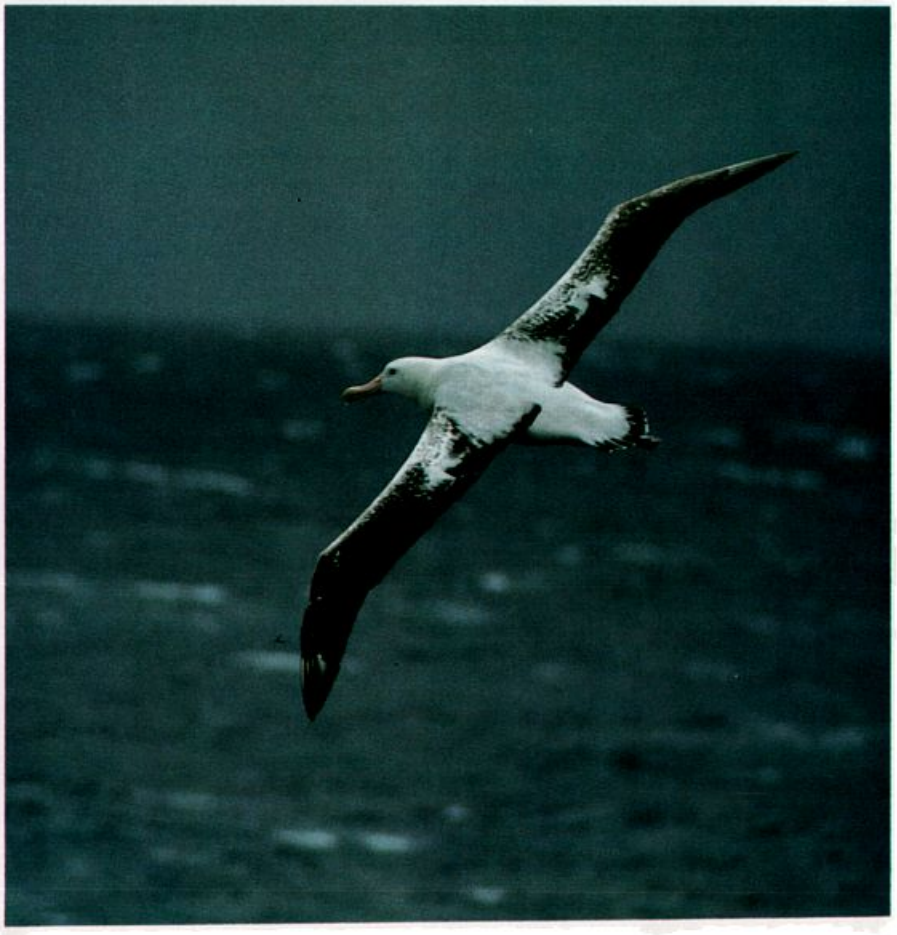
His storm-petrels are "feathers in the wind," while an albatross "on the invisible currents of the breeze," appears "merely to follow its pinkish bill at random." Sometimes, he can be scintillatingly metaphorical. For example, he notes that with burrow-nesting seabirds "the muscular and nervous coordination necessary to produce flight is inhibited until it bursts forth in final and perfect form, like Minerva from the head of Jove."

Or, he can be almost rhapsodic:

> When the air is filled with a flock of whale-birds (prions) careening in the breeze, rising, falling, volplaning, twisting, sideslipping above the sea, now flashing their white breasts, now turning their almost invisible backs—they resemble the motes in a windy sunbeam.

Elsewhere, he mentions seeing clouds of prions, "filling the air like the flakes of a snowstorm, and stretching in all directions toward the circle of the horizon from daybreak until dark." The style is an effective lure that draws the reader closer and closer to the natural history and scientific subject matter. Murphy not only inspires, he converts his readers into dedicated dreamers.

Oceanic Birds has stood the passage of time, and it is Murphy's crowning achievement. It is a unique blend of ornithology, meteorology, oceanography and geography. It is a tale spun by a master storyteller, reflecting an education steeped in history and the classics.



A dorsal view of a Wandering Albatross whose enormous wingspan can reach up to 11 1/2 feet. Drake Passage, January 1985. Photo/Ron Naveen.

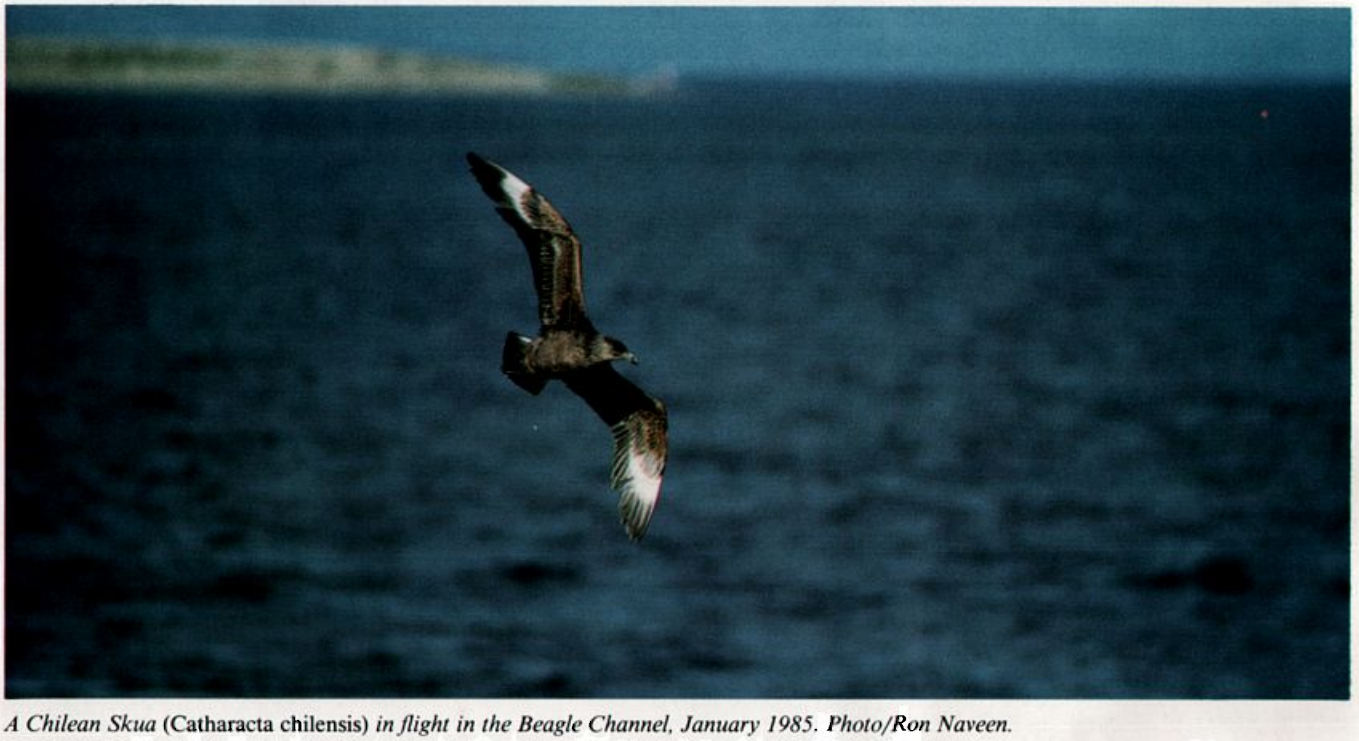
Murphy changing film on Bull's Island, S. C. Photo/Alexander Sprunt, Jr. Courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

This two-volume treasure recounts a poignant time in this century's history when, despite some modern advances, some still sought adventure sailing the high seas, often turning to the Deep South for wealth, fame, and experience from the burgeoning sealing and whaling industries, or from the last great geographical quest on this planet—the South Pole.

Indeed, Murphy's own first trip to South America fit this mold. Leaving his new bride, Grace, behind, the daunting and opportunistic young scientist joined the whaling brig DAISY in 1912–1913 for what was actually the last United States whaling venture, under sail, to the Roaring 40s and Furious 50s. This tale is told in *Logbook for Grace.*

There is much lore in *Oceanic Birds,* including Murphy's fond reminiscences of Rollo Beck, an inveterate scientist who did extensive field work for the California Academy of Sciences during the early part of this century. Beck was the first to discover that certain seabirds could be attracted to chumlines trailed behind his rowboat. Beck delighted in attracting little-known species to his skiff, to then be introduced to his disbelieving shipmates. In fact, he discov-

Right: A benign view of an about-to-fledge juvenile Antarctic Skua (Catharacta antarctica lonnbergi) *Salisbury Plain, South Georgia, February 1986. Its voracious appetite accounts for a fair share of penguin chicks and eggs taken. Photo/Ron Naveen.*



A Chilean Skua (Catharacta chilensis) *in flight in the Beagle Channel, January 1985. Photo/Ron Naveen.*

ered Hornby's Storm-Petrel off Peru by chumming.

Murphy incorporates engaging recollections throughout *Oceanic Birds.* When faced one day with the daunting task of preparing a large number of King Penguin specimens, Murphy employed the services of the band of scavenging skuas that had surrounded him at his South Georgia worksite. He quickly discovered that the skuas were particular, and somewhat refined feeders; they carefully cleaned the penguin carcasses without mutilating any of the skin and feathers. Cleverly, with the aid of his feathered co-workers, Murphy managed to complete his preparations quicker and with less effort than expected.

Even now, 50 years after its first publication, *Oceanic Birds of South America* continues to lead us into the future. Murphy anticipated the present, often vigorous debate about using a bird's jizz or gestalt as an identification tool. He recognized up to seven different flight styles, and how various families and groups of seabirds could be distinguished by their respective flight and feeding habits. Further, he used these characters as a touchstone for some of his most compelling writing.

Peter Harrison, modern young author of *Seabirds: an Identification Guide,* speaks of Murphy and his classic with glowing admiration:

> [*Oceanic Birds*] occupies the most prized and hallowed position on my library shelves, and I do not foresee that another 50 years will alter my feelings. I regard Murphy as a cult-figure. He was the forerunner of the modern birder who sacrifices anything and everything, undergoing hardships and deprivation in pursuit of his overriding love of seabirds.

"Overriding love" is perhaps why we continue to travel so many miles offshore, seeking further, close encounters with the mystery birds of the sea.

The sun stoops lower in the western sky, and the MARINER quickly approaches its berth on the bay side of Ocean City. Everyone's out on deck, newly emergent from naps or daydreams, inhaling the late afternoon breeze and letting the air inflate their already exalted spirits.

For those of us leading the trip, with a collective 250+ pelagic trips out of Ocean City, Murphyian feelings are being bandied about, affirming and concluding that birding just can't get much better than on the high seas. The triumphs are relatively infrequent, but they more than compensate for the agonies and disappointments that ocean-watching sometimes entails. I wonder if Murphy had any idea that pelagic birding would someday become so popular.

That jealous mistress, the Western North Atlantic, did not disappoint this afternoon. It brought juvenile jaegers, a possible Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, a huge number of Audubon's Shearwaters, and a floodtide of Bridled Terns. But, perhaps Murphy's ongoing legacy is that the talk, now on deck, has shifted from checkmarks and lifelists to more

Guanays, or Peruvian Cormorants, Santa Rosa Island, Peru. Taken from Oceanic Birds of South America. *Painting by Francis Lee Jaques. Courtesy of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.*

cosmic questions: Where do these creatures go after our brief glimpses of their lives? Will they return next week, or even next year? Do water temperature or salinity correlate with the presence or absence of seabirds? Ah! curious birders lusting to know more about seabirds which consider man and his surroundings the mere "rim" of their oceanic realm.

That is the condition of pelagic birders. Through thick and thin, good and bad days, it always comes down to spending time totally in the seabirds' environs, far removed from land and man's influence, letting one's mind and emotions wander—much like the albatross.

With nearly 75% of the earth's surface devoted to ocean, it's comforting to realize that the thrill of exploration still burns a bright flame in many hearts.

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Murphy admires a Red-footed Booby nestling in the Canton Islands, Republic of Kiribati, in April 1949. Photo courtesy Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.

Guano fowl of the Humboldt Current: Peruvian Pelicans, Boobies, and Cormorants. Painting by Francis Lee Jaques. Taken from Oceanic Birds of South America. *Courtesy of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.*