

Spring Blitz! May 17 to June 2

In spring 2008, Seabirding ran an unprecedented 17 trips in a row from May 17-June 2. While the diversity was not as high as during the 15 -day stretch last spring, we encountered the usual suspects in the Gulf Stream plus an unexpected species on June 2. We had excellent views of our Gulf Stream "specialty", the Black-capped Petrel, on each day, though May 26 we had our lowest tally for the spring with only 6 or 7 individuals. This was a day with unexpectedly cooler water due to North winds the previous day, resulting in calm seas and Leach's Storm-Petrels in amazing numbers & close proximity! For a storm-petrel that is sometimes difficult to observe, it was a treat to find groups of this *Oceanodroma* flying by and sitting in pure flocks on the water for close approach! European Storm-Petrels were seen on two of these trips with the individual on May 18th proving to be the earliest recorded by nine days! The other, seen on May 20th, was a fleeting encounter in the slick on one of the roughest days we were out. We had three encounters with the elusive Bermuda Petrel, twice from Hatteras on May 21 & 28th, and on the Saturday trip from Oregon Inlet May 24th. (Some birders on that trip saw all three of the rare gadfly petrels that Saturday!) While Trindade Petrels were in short supply with only a few individuals seen this spring, Fea's Petrels were in good numbers with the most individuals ever seen in one day May 20 (most likely 4 individuals!). May 20th was an amazing, if quite rough and windy, day with 25-30 Black-capped Petrels following the boat well into the shallows with the last one seen only 4.3 miles from the inlet! Three Fea's Petrels were seen on this track home with the last one in only 126 feet of water! Our final day of the streak, June 2, was the most thrilling of all 17 trips, with a Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel seen fleetingly, then rediscovered in our chum slick for almost 45 minutes of relaxed observation (and thousands of photos!!). This was the seventh species of storm-petrel seen from the *Stormy-Petrel II* and the first Swinhoe's sighting in 10 years off NC!



Clymene Dolphin © Kate Sutherland

Dolphin Days

Last spring we had some noteworthy cetacean sightings with the first male Gervais Beaked Whale ever to be photographed in the North Atlantic and an exciting look at the very elusive Dwarf Sperm Whale. This spring our surprises came as well, just in smaller packages! May 17th we were delighted to find a very cooperative pod of Clymene Dolphins, our second ever encounter with this species! These small dolphins are in the same genus as the Spinner & Spotted Dolphins and are highly energetic. They have black tips on their beaks which make them quite easy to identify if seen well, which they were (see photo)! Ten days later on the 27th of May, about 40 miles offshore in water over 9,000 feet deep, a small pod of Rough-toothed Dolphins came to the bow! This is only the fourth time our trips have found this highly pelagic species of dolphin, which is quite distinctive if seen well. They do not have a "beak" but a more sloping forehead to the snout. We were able to spend some time with these individuals and even had them approach us again later in the day! Another exciting sighting came on June 8th when we were able to intercept a pod of *Pseudorca*, or False Killer Whales. These blackfish feed on fast moving fish like tuna, and sometimes other species of dolphin! Resembling a Pilot Whale, the *Pseudorca* is more tapered and torpedo shaped, made for speed! We did see a few Cuvier's Beaked Whales, the largest group on June 2nd with about 7 individuals. We had a few *Mesoplodon* sightings, but no positive specific identifications.

Dovekies, Puffins, & Skuas

This winter we ran 8 out of 6 trips (yes, we added two to the schedule due to demand and good conditions!), making it out on an unprecedented six Saturdays in a row! The Dovekies were here this year and the conditions allowed for viewing like never before! Our usual view is a quick flyby...but this year we had them swimming along beside the boat! The high count was 106-108 on February 2. This was also the day we saw three Atlantic Puffins, not an annual visitor, but seen on four of the eight trips! Razorbills were encountered on all trips, but not in the numbers we sometimes see here off of Cape Hatteras. While there were not high numbers, we had some of the best views ever of this boat shy species! Black-legged Kittiwakes were in short supply with only 5 individuals seen distantly on the first trip. But the Skuas! We had Great Skua on five of these trips! This is a new record for us in the winter off Hatteras! On February 16th we saw one or two Great Skuas, and had some good looks! While we did not have a trip scheduled for the 17th, we offered it to the passengers with us on the 16th and ventured offshore again with just 8 intrepid passengers! We were rewarded once again with two close Great Skua sightings, a Little Gull, Manx Shearwater, Dovekies, Northern Fulmars, and an unexpected Greater Shearwater! The latter was only our second record for February! Other birds of note include a Parasitic Jaeger seen on February 9th, and plenty of Red Phalaropes on February 23rd

with 1151+ counted! We had sightings of California Gull, Iceland Gull, "Nelson's" Gull, Thayer's Gull, Little Gull, and some interesting hybrids. On January 26th we were surprised by a Northern Right Whale that surfaced in front of us! We also had the usual cetacean sightings of Common and Bottlenose Dolphins, and even a couple Spotted Dolphins on the 16th of February. While we usually see Humpback Whales here in the winter, we only had one or two sightings this year. Next winter we are going to try a new schedule running two out of three days on winter weekends to maximize our chances of finding skuas and other uncommon visitors.



Dovekie © Brian Patteson

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Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel © Steve NG Howell

Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel Again, Finally!

It's been nearly ten years since we observed and photographed what we clearly identified as a Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel off Hatteras Inlet on August 8, 1998. Our article in *North American Birds* (53:6-10) which was illustrated with many photos of the bird seemed more than adequate to get the species accepted to the AOU and ABA checklists, but the ultra-conservative committees, which are sorely lacking in at sea field experience did not accept the record. But this time I think we've got it. On our June 2 pelagic trip from Hatteras this year, we managed to entice a Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel to feed in our chum slick for over half an hour. Needless to say, during that time period some of our observers obtained some of the best photos ever taken at sea of the species. Our lengthy study of the bird made it clear to us that it was not some sort of oddly dark Leach's Storm-Petrel, which has long been a contention of some skeptics. Body shape, tail shape, bill shape, and flight manner were all inconsistent with Leach's. Furthermore, this combination of characters did not match any of the other potential vagrant all-dark stormies from the Pacific either. Steve Howell actually had photos of all of those species on hand for a handy comparison to the June 2 Swinhoe's. Remarkably enough, this was a lifer for Steve, one of only a couple of storm-petrels he had never seen! We have already submitted articles about the record to both *North American Birds* and *Birding World* (U.K.). Swinhoe's has been captured in the Eastern Atlantic on a number of occasions, but there have only been three well-documented occurrences on this side of the pond. In addition to the 2008 and 1998 sightings, Ned Brinkley closely observed one on a fishing trip off Oregon Inlet, NC in August 1993. The stronghold of Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels is in the North Pacific, but there is evidence suggesting it might breed in tiny numbers in the North Atlantic.

Black-bellied Storm-Petrel

Last June during one of our dedicated photography trips, we were trying to entice some Leach's Storm-Petrels to feed in the slick when Kate spotted a Black-bellied Storm-Petrel. Fortunately for us, Harold Stiver unwittingly photographed it because it did not linger long over the slick. This was the second BBSP we had spotted in less than a year off of Hatteras. The first was on July 15, 2006 aboard the *Stormy Petrel*. These were the second and third records for the western North Atlantic. The only other one was spotted by Capt John Gallop and closely observed by all aboard a trip off Oregon Inlet, NC on May 31, 2004. This species, like the European Storm-Petrel, appears to be very rare but regular visitor off Cape Hatteras, but might have been missed due to the paucity of trips during late June and early July in previous years.



Upcoming Splits & ID Challenges

Bring your cameras because it might take another look to figure out what you just saw. Band-rumped Storm-Petrels are being split out, and there are at least four species of "Band-rumps" which could potentially occur in the western North Atlantic. Two species nest in the Azores- in the same burrows at different seasons! These would appear to be the most likely visitors here, but we could also be getting "Band-rumps" from Madeira and even the Cape Verde Islands. If it's anything like *Pterodroma feae*, it might take a while for the split to go through and to get the new English names sorted out. But that doesn't mean we cannot get cracking on these birds now, prior to an AOU or ABA split. Most of the spring birds this year appeared to be of the same type, a long-winged, square-tailed bird in active primary molt. Presumably these are the winter breeders from the Azores. We also saw a bird with a notched tail which was not molting the primaries; this might have been one of the summer breeding types. With the recent advances in high resolution digital camera bodies and sharp telephoto lenses, we should be able to sort some of these birds out by looking closely and then examining photos. This has been helpful in our study of "Cory's Shearwater," which has been split into two species by some ornithologists. Our photographic analysis, however, suggests that there is a gray area where it is difficult, likely impossible, to distinguish Cory's from "Scopoli's" Shearwaters. Steve Howell and I recently published a well illustrated article overseas stressing the difficulty of sorting the two types: see *Alula* 14:12-21. Black-capped Petrel has long been considered a highly variable species, and this is another one, which we have been trying to study more closely over the last couple of years. There appears to be a consistent correlation between size, molt timing, and coloration in these birds. We are still gathering data, but our findings so far suggest there are at least two or three types, which could be breeding on different islands at slightly different times. The plumage differences appear to be greater than what is found in Fea's and Zino's Petrel, which are considered to be two good species. By the way, some authors have split what we have been calling "Fea's" into two species now: Fea's and Desertas Petrels. So just when we seemed ready to get Fea's accepted by the AOU and ABA, there is yet another challenge to face. Confused? Come out with us this summer and bring your cameras. Summer is the best time to see the largest numbers of "Band-rumps," "Black-caps," and "Cory's" by the way.



Pomarine Jaeger © Brian Patteson

Seabird Photography

There has never been a better time to come out and photograph pelagic seabirds off Cape Hatteras. The lenses are better than ever, digital bodies are cheaper than ever, and because you don't need film, it is actually possible to take as many photos as you have space for. And memory cards are dirt cheap now. Ten years ago, when I was trying hard to get photos of seabirds here, it was much more difficult. I knew what I wanted to the skipper to do when approaching birds, but more often than not, it didn't work out that way. Now Brian drives the boat, Kate (mostly) throws the chum, and things are much better than before. The catch is that Brian doesn't get to take many photos anymore, but it's a willing sacrifice for being able to get offshore and keeping the people happy. As we said before, lots of good photos will be essential for sorting out the upcoming splits, so you can be a part of the fun.

Upcoming Photography Trips in 2008

August 25, 26, 27, & 28th
three out of four days \$650

We still have space available on this photo set. The spaces are limited to the first 12 people to sign up so that everyone has sufficient space for their equipment, and for the perfect shot! The departure point is Wanchese, NC—close to Nags Head & Manteo. Contact us ASAP if you are interested in joining us for these dedicated photography trips.



Fea's Petrel © Steve NG Howell

Enter a New Era!

We have now run about 70 pelagic birding trips in 18 months aboard our boat, the *Stormy Petrel II*. Now in our second season with this boat we have been able to progress much further in our technique, leadership, and equipment (chum!). This boat has a spacious, walk-around bow with a pulpit that can accommodate four people comfortably. There are high railings all around the deck. While we have sacrificed some cabin space for deck space, we feel this is perfectly acceptable since everyone should be outside on a pelagic trip! Since we limit our tours to a maximum of 25 participants, there is plenty of space for everyone and their gear (including cameras). Due to the spacious decks, it is easier than ever to take photos of the birds we encounter and Brian is always quick to put them in the best light possible! If you have not been out with us since we used to charter the Miss Hatteras for our trips, think about making another trip to Hatteras. While we do not offer the galley services we had previously, the seabirding and photo ops far surpass the former experience! Thanks again to everyone who has sailed with us since we began this new era in seabirding, you have made these discoveries possible, and you never know what is behind the next swell!

Private Charters

I've said it before, but I'll say it again. Private charters on our boat, the *Stormy Petrel II*, are marginally more expensive (per person) than a regularly scheduled trip if you can gather ten or so people. We can also customize trips for those who would like to spend more time looking for marine mammals, sampling the Sargasso Weed, taking photos, or even fishing. Those who haven't been out with us for a while might be surprised to learn that there are some days in the spring or summer when we don't even skip a bait at all. But if you would like to bring some non-birders along and mix it up with some deep sea fishing, we can do it on a private charter. If you would like to share a charter with other birders, let us know and we will add the date to our schedule.

Special 2008 Charter Rate:
 10 or less people \$1550, additional participants \$155 each



Band-rumped Storm-Petrel © Steve NG Howell

Fall 2008

September 20 & 21
December 6 & 7

These will be regular Gulf Stream pelagic trips departing from Hatteras, NC aboard the *Stormy Petrel II*. Please see our website www.seabirding.com for information, or send us an email at brian@patteson.com, or call (252) 986-1363.



Rough-toothed Dolphins © Steve NG Howell