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Southern Hemisphere Albatrosses in North American Waters

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by **Steven G. Mlodinow**

For the purposes of this article, North America is defined as it is by the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU 1998).

Above: Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*, Scotia Sea, January 1999 (Greg W. Lasley).

Albatrosses seize the imagination. They signify mystery and mobility, wide-open spaces and unknown territory. They inspire introspection on one hand and wanderlust on the other. So strange and fantastic was the albatross's apparition to early European mariners that they believed these birds' bodies harboured the souls of dead sailors. To kill one was to be cursed. Modern day birders aren't quite as awed by the sight of an albatross, but the appearance of a vagrant albatross does create a reaction that is far from calm.

Eight species of albatrosses have occurred in North American waters, five of which are considered vagrants (American Ornithologists Union [AOU] 1998): Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Shy Albatross *T.cauta*, Black-browed Albatross *T.melanophris*, Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebetria palpebrata*, and Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*. Each of these species has made it to North American waters from the Antarctic or other regions far south of the equator. At times, this has led to questions regarding origin and possible ship-assistance. This article reviews these albatrosses' occurrence in North American waters with an eye to discerning any possible patterns. Note that Short-tailed Albatross, a Northern Hemisphere albatross, is not considered a vagrant because of its now annual occurrence near the Aleutian Islands and at Midway Island. Nonetheless, this species would be treated with the proper awe and respect by most birders.

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Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, off Sydney, NSW, Australia, August 1997 (Tony Palliser).

Yellow-nosed Albatross

The Yellow-nosed Albatross is a fairly numerous small albatross of the southern Atlantic and Indian oceans. It nests on several islands between 35°S and 50°S, with breeding birds arriving at colonies during August and September and departing between March and May (Harrison 1983). Their at-sea range extends from the eastern shores of South America east almost to New Zealand, mostly south of the Tropic of Cancer, but with birds ranging north to 15°S off West Africa and 5°S off Brazil (Harrison 1983). There are two subspecies: *T.c. chlororhynchos* breeding on the Tristan de Cunha group and Gough Island in the south Atlantic and *T.c. bassi* breeding on several islands in the Indian Ocean including St. Paul, Amsterdam and Prince Edward Islands and Crozets. Notably, Atlantic birds are not common in the Indian Ocean, and Indian Ocean birds are rare west of South Africa (Enticott and Tipling 1997).

The first Yellow-nosed Albatross for North America was collected near the mouth of the Moisie River, Quebec, on August 20, 1885 (Murphy 1936). Since then, there have been about 26 additional records, all from the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and mostly between New York and Nova Scotia (see table 1). Records increased in frequency during the 1970s, when 12 Yellow-nosed Albatrosses were seen, but have declined since then, with only four during the 1980s and three so far from the 1990s. This species has been found off North America year round, but a substantial majority have occurred during May (eight records) and from early July through late August (12 records).

Few records denote the age of the bird involved, but ageing is not necessarily easy in the field. Subspecific identification is rarely mentioned, even with specimen records, but one bird photographed near St. Marks Light, Florida, on July 3, 1983 was reportedly of the expected nominate race which breeds in the South Atlantic (Stevenson and Anderson 1992).

Yellow-nosed Albatross records from the eastern North Atlantic are almost nonexistent. There is only one solid record (Norway, April 1994) and a likely correct one (Cornwall, England, April 29, 1985) (Snow and Perrins 1998). This is in distinct contrast to the pattern seen in Black-browed Albatross discussed below.



Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* , off Sydney, NSW, Australia, July 1997
(Tony Palliser).

Table 1. Yellow-nosed Albatross Records in North American Waters

near mouth of Moisie R., PQ (sp)	8/20/1885	Murphy 1936
off Grand Manan I., NB/ME (sp)	8/1/13	Murphy 1936, Tufts 1986
East Freyburg, ME (sp)	7/23/34	Norton 1934
off Brevard Co., FL	7/13/58	AFN 12:405
near Monhegan I., ME	3/21/60	McDaniel 1973
3 km off Jones Beach, NY (ph)	5/29/60	Bull 1961
near Monhegan I., ME	5/12/64	McDaniel 1973
50 km off Yarmouth, NS	7/12/68	Tufts 1986
Holly Beach, LA (ph)	5/9/70	AB 20:616
Bird I., off Marion, MA	5/7/71	Veit and Peterson 1995
Gardiner's Island, Long I., NY	6/8/71	AB 25:837
S. Padre I., Nueces Co., TX (sp)	5/14/72	Oberholser 1974
90 km east of Ocean City, MD (ph)	2/1/75	AB 29:672
Cultivator Shoal, NW Georges Bank, MA	6/14/76	Veit and Peterson 1995
Croton Point, NY	8/10/76	Weissman and Howe 1976
70 km west of Yarmouth, NS	8/20/76	Tufts 1986
Cox's Ledge, RI	8/21/76	Conway 1992
Willacy Co., TX (sp)	10/28/76	TOS 1995
Cox's Ledge, RI	8/21/79	Conway 1992
88 km from VA coast**	12/3/79	Kain 1987
Back Bay, VA **	11/28/81	Kain 1987
near St. Marks Light, FL (ph)	7/3/83	AB 37:980
Cabot Strait, NS	8/5/87	AB 42:232
Seal I., NS (ph)	5/28/89	AB 43:444
Key Largo, FL (sp)	5/27/92	Stevenson and Anderson 1992
Dieppe/Moncton, NB (ph)*	5/24/93	AB 47:1084
San Jose I., Aransas, TX (sp)	7/11/97	FN 51:1019

sp= specimen obtained, ph = photographed.

* 6/20/93 report of this bird was in error (D. Christie, pers. comm.)

** considered hypothetical by Virginia Avian Records Committee due only to lack of photo or specimen (Kain 1987)

Shy Albatross

The Shy Albatross breeds only on islands near southeastern Australia and New Zealand. There are three subspecies, each of which is identifiable in the field and may represent separate species: White-capped (*T.c. cauta*), Salvin's (*T.c. salvini*), and Chatham Island (*T.c. eremita*) (Harrison 1983, Enticott and Tipling 1997). The last of these does not disperse far from its nesting grounds on the Chatham Islands, but White-capped and Salvin's wander widely and are fairly numerous (Enticott and Tipling 1997). When not breeding, Salvin's occurs from Australia east to southern Chile and then north along South America's west coast to 5°S (Harrison 1983). White-capped Albatross is circumpolar in range, occurring mostly south of 40°S but ranging north to 25°S along the west coasts of South America and Africa (Harrison 1987).

There are only two records of Shy Albatross from North America. The first was an adult female collected 62 km west of the Quillayute River mouth, Washington, on September 1, 1951 (Slipp 1952), and the second was a well-photographed subadult at Heceta Bank off Lane County, Oregon, on October 5, 1996 (Hunter and Bailey 1997). Somewhat surprisingly, both birds were *T.c. cauta*, not the more northerly wandering *T.c. salvini*. There is one report, however, of *T.c. salvini* — a bird seen from shore at Point Piedras Blancas, California on May 28, 1996 (FN 50:332). This bird was recently rejected in a split vote by the California Bird Records Committee (M. Rogers, pers. comm.), but may well have been correctly identified. Outside North American waters, there are two Northern Hemisphere records of Shy Albatross: a subadult seen between Eilat, Israel and Taba, Egypt from February 20 to March 7, 1981 (Snow and Perrins 1998), and a bird off Somalia near the Gulf of Aden in the Indian Ocean on September 18, 1986 (Meeth and Meeth 1988).

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Shy Albatross *Thalassarche cauta*,
off Portland, Victoria, Australia, September 1997 (Tony Palliser).

Black-browed Albatross

This is the most numerous Southern Hemisphere albatross, with a total population in excess of 500,000 pairs (Enticott and Tipling 1997). Breeding islands are strewn widely across the southern oceans between 46°S and 56°S, but about 70 percent of Black-broweds breed on the Falkland Islands (Enticott and Tipling 1997). Nesting occurs mostly between August and May (Harrison 1983). When not breeding, Black-broweds generally wander circumpolar waters between 65°S and 23°S but do range farther north in cool upwellings, reaching 10°S off Peru and 20°S off western Africa (Harrison 1983).

The first AOU area Black-browed Albatross record was from the Caribbean Sea off Vauclin, Martinique, during 1956 (AOU 1998). The 11 records since then have all been along the Atlantic seaboard, with most coming from Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. These birds were scattered without any obvious peak between late June and mid-November (see table 2). As with Yellow-nosed Albatross, the rate of new records waxed during the 1970s but has since waned, with only three records from the 1980s and three from the 1990s. Most North American records seem to be of adults, but the first, and so far only, bird photographed in the AOU area was an immature southwest of Norfolk Canyon, about 65 km off Virginia Beach, Virginia, on February 6, 1999 (B.Patteson, N.Brinkley, pers. comm.).

Elsewhere in the North Atlantic, Black-browed Albatrosses have occurred with greater frequency. As of 1997, there were 27 Black-browed Albatross records from Britain and Ireland (Rogers 1998), plus others from Greenland, Iceland, the Faeroes, Norway, Sweden, Spitsbergen, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and the Canary Islands (Lewington et al. 1991, Snow and Perrins 1998). Most British records have occurred from late April to mid-May and from July to early November (Dymond, *et al.* 1989), thus closely matching the North American pattern. Higher numbers of Black-browed records occurred in Britain between 1963 and 1969, but the frequency has since declined (Dymond, *et al.* 1989). As in North America, most British records have been of adults.

The above having been said, the apparent pattern of Black-browed Albatross vagrancy to Great Britain and nearby areas may be skewed by one bird: an adult Black-browed affectionately named "Albert Ross" that spent most summers from 1972 to 1995 at a remote gannetry at the northern tip of the Shetland Islands, Scotland. Albert would disappear from the gannetry for days at a time, and several sightings of Black-browed Albatross in Britain occurred during these absences, thus raising the possibility that this one individual may have accounted for a number of the above 27 British records (A. Wilson, pers. comm.). Amazingly, Albert is not unique. Another Black-browed returned annually to the Faeroe Islands from 1860 to 1894 when, tragically, it was shot (Bourne 1967).

The apparent dichotomy provided by Black-browed and Yellow-nosed albatrosses in the North Atlantic may in part be due to a few long-staying birds, such as Albert, seen repeatedly over a number of years in one general area, thus skewing the data. On the other hand, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses seem to favour warmer waters than most other southern albatrosses (Harrison 1983, Enticott and Tipling 1997), and this predisposition would be expected to bring more Yellow-nosed Albatrosses to North America's Atlantic Coast, while the cooler waters off Europe would attract relatively more Black-broweds.

Table 2. Black-browed Albatross Records in North American Waters

off Vauclin, Martinique	11/12/56	Bond 1959
Bird I., Marion, MA (2)	6/28/72	Du Mont 1973
Moorehead City, NC (2)	8/19/72	Du Mont 1973
Nantucket-Hyannis Ferry, MA	9/16/73	Veit and Peterson 1995
30 km east of Newburyport, MA	7/11/76	Veit and Peterson 1995
Plum I., MA	7/24/76	Veit and Peterson 1995
Cabot Strait, 50 km NE of Sydney, NS	7/15/83	Tufts 1986
Cabot Strait Ferry, NS	7/21/86	AB 41:53
Manasquan, NJ	10/24/89	P. Lehman, pers. comm.
South of Yarmouth, NS	8/23/91	AB 46:53
Chatham, MA	9/21/96	FN 51:23
65 km off Virginia Beach, VA(photo)	2/6/99	Patteson and Brinkley, pers.comm.

The following published records were rejected by state bird records committees: 2, Cape May Point, New Jersey, October 7, 1979 (Leck 1989, P. Lehman, pers. comm.); and one off Cape Canaveral, Florida, September 13, 1974 (AB 29:44, Stevenson and Anderson 1994).



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Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*,
Top: Scotia Sea, between South Georgia and the Falkland Islands, January 1999 (Greg W. Lasley). Left:
February 1999 (Bruce Hallett). Right: Strait of Magellan, Chile, November 1998 (Alvaro Jaramillo).

Light-mantled Albatross

The Light-mantled Albatross breeds on scattered islands across the southern oceans between 46°S and 55°S (Enticott and Tipling 1997). When not nesting, this species maintains its circumpolar range but the northern edge of this range moves to about 33°S, excepting in the cool waters off western South America where birds occasionally venture as far north as 20°S (Harrison 1983). Breeders arrive at nesting islands during September and October and depart during April and May (Harrison 1983).

This elegant species was reportedly collected by Townsend in Oregon off the mouth of the Columbia River (Audubon 1839), but the report was later rejected (AOU 1957), and Bourne (1967) labelled this record as “extraordinarily improbable”. Nonetheless, the Light-mantled Albatross’s place on the North American list was redeemed when an adult appeared in front of a boatful of incredulous birders at central California’s Cordell Bank on July 17, 1994 (Stallcup and Terrill 1996). This is the only Northern Hemisphere record of this species.



Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*
South Georgia, left: January 1998; right: January 1996 (Greg W. Lasley).

Wandering Albatross

The Wandering Albatross, with a wingspan up to nearly four metres, vies with Royal Albatross for the world's largest albatross. Its breeding range is circumpolar between 35°S and 55°S (Harrison 1983). When not breeding, Wandering Albatrosses range up to the Tropic of Capricorn, excepting along the western coasts of Africa and South America, where they regularly occur north to 10°S (Harrison 1983). These biennial breeders arrive at the nesting colonies in November or December and do not leave until December to February a year later (Harrison 1983).

This magnificent bird has been recorded twice in North America. The first record came from Panama Bay, Panama, during August 1937 (Murphy 1938). The second bird was found by the astonished residents of The Sea Ranch in Sonoma County, California, on July 11, 1967 and left the next day when suitable winds arose (Paxton 1968). The published photos and description of this bird seem to best fit age stage III, as described by Harrison (1983).

There are several reports of Wandering Albatross from elsewhere in the Northern Hemisphere. Brazil (1991) reports two seen near the Senkaku Islands, Japan, on November 26, 1970. From Europe, accepted records include two from Belgium, in September 1833 and April 1887 (Snow and Perrins 1998), one collected off Palermo, Sicily, on October 4, 1957 (Bourne 1967), and one about 80 km off the southwest coast of Portugal on October 18, 1963 (Bourne 1966).



Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*, adult , January 1999 (Bruce Hallett).

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Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*, subadult, January 1999 (Bruce Hallett).

Other Southern Albatrosses

Waved *Phoebastria irrorata*, Gray-headed *Thalassarche chrysostoma*, and Royal *Diomedea epomophora* albatrosses have also been reported from North America or Europe, but these reports have lacked sufficient credibility to establish these species' occurrence. The most convincing sightings are those of Waved Albatross from Panama (AOU 1998). Gray-headed Albatross has been reported off Oregon, central California, and Panama, but these reports are unsatisfactory (AOU 1957, Wetmore 1965); a report of this species from Norway in April 1837 is also considered questionable (Snow and Perrins 1998). Finally, the Royal Albatross skull reputedly found in Morocco is questionable as to both species and origin (Snow and Perrins 1998).

Comparative Vagrancy

By comparing patterns of vagrancy, some trends become apparent and some tentative predictions can be made. Not surprising is the observation that albatrosses with larger world populations tend to be the species that appear in the Northern Hemisphere. The world population of Southern Hemisphere albatrosses can be ranked in approximately the following order: Black-browed, Yellow-nosed, Gray-headed, Shy (White-capped), Shy (Salvin's), Buller's, Light-mantled, Waved, Wandering, Royal, Sooty, Shy (Chatham Island), and Amsterdam Island

(Enticott and Tipling 1997). This order seems to follow the same general trend as records from the Northern Hemisphere, especially with regards to the more numerous species.

Another apparent correlation exists between occurrence in the Northern Hemisphere and a species' tendency to wander northward along the shores of Africa and South America (see maps in Harrison 1983). Each species that has occurred in the Northern Hemisphere exhibits this trait, and no taxon without this trait (Amsterdam Island, Waved, Buller's, Shy (Chatham Island), and Sooty) has so far been found there. Note that Buller's Albatross is shown in Harrison (1983) as ranging north along western South America, but the text implies that this is a rare occurrence. There are three taxa of albatrosses that are fairly numerous, wander northward along the shores of South America or Africa, and have not yet been recorded with certainty in the Northern Hemisphere: Royal, Salvin's, and Gray-headed.

Given the above trends, the following might be expected to occur in North American waters at some time in the future: Royal Albatross (in Atlantic or Pacific), Salvin's Albatross (in Pacific), and Gray-headed (in Pacific). Also, the lack of Black-browed records from the North Pacific Ocean remains perplexing but may in some part be due to confusion with Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis*. This species seems likely to occur off North America's West Coast at some point in the future.

From There to Here

Finally, no discussion of Southern Hemisphere albatrosses off North America would be complete without addressing the vexing question of "How did they get here?" These records seem to be plagued by doubts of natural origin, especially with the rarer species, yet albatrosses can cover vast distances with apparent ease. One nesting Wandering Albatross was found to have travelled 5601 km during a 13 day feeding foray (Walker *et al.* 1995). Light-mantled Albatrosses were found feeding their chicks prey species that occurred no closer than 1000 km from the nest site, thus requiring sorties of at least 2000 km (Weimerskirch *et al.* 1986), and breeding Gray-headed Albatrosses were observed foraging 1850 km from their nest islands (Weimerskirch *et al.* 1988). Though it is true that albatrosses are highly wind dependent for their mobility, the notion that there are vast areas of impenetrable doldrums in the tropics does not appear to be true. Stallcup and Terrill (1996) note that there are no doldrums in the eastern Pacific except in a small area in the Gulf of Panama. Indeed, if wind dependent birds did face such large windless areas, the movement of millions of shearwaters from southern to northern hemispheres would be hard to explain, even accounting for the shearwaters' greater ability for sustained flight. That being said, albatrosses do follow boats, are caught, and there is at least one known instance of a southern albatross (a Black-browed) being brought all the way to England (Green 1887). Thus, southern albatrosses seem perfectly capable of reaching North America on their own, but some consideration of ship assistance seems prudent.

Summary and Conclusion

Five species of Southern Hemisphere albatrosses have reached North American waters: Yellow-nosed (27 records), Shy (2 records), Black-browed (12 records), Light-mantled (1 record), and Wandering (2 records). Records of these species span the calendar but are heavily concentrated from early May through late August, matching these species' non-breeding season. Notably, many (perhaps most) birds seem to have been adults, thus mirroring the pattern in Europe.

These albatrosses seem quite capable of reaching the Northern Hemisphere on their own. Furthering this assumption is the observation that the albatross species that tend to wander north along the coasts of South America and Africa are the same ones that have occurred off North America. Additionally, it is the more common species that have generally appeared off our coasts. Given these trends, future occurrence in North America of Gray-headed, Shy (Salvin's), and Royal Albatross seems not unlikely, thereby issuing a challenge for the intrepid pelagic voyagers and sea watchers of North America.

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