

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

*Birds seen on Crossing the Atlantic,  
1st week in July 49*

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The ship rose skyward on the crest of the passing swell, paused momentarily on top, then plunged swiftly down the long green slope to bury its prow in the oncoming roller. Sheets of white spray shot high into the air, and swept back over the decks, sending passengers scampering for cover. From where I stood just beneath the bridge, it was clear that the world was made up of tumbling white-capped water and blue sky. At regular intervals the greater waves reared their glistening backs, rolling relentlessly forward under the impact of a stiff nor'westerly breeze, sped past the ship and onward sometime to crash on the beaches of France and Spain. Hundreds of miles from land the gods of the sea held undisputed sway.

Neptune's turmoil kept me fascinated minute after minute, for what is more hypnotic than a majestic procession of mighty waves, moving with rhythmic regularity in an unceasing parade from horizon to horizon. Behind the fascination is a half hidden horror. The ship and the people upon it are nothing, a toy, the sport of unseen gods at play. How can any life survive in this endless watery waste?

Suddenly the spell is broken. A brown shape comes skimming along a trough a few inches above the water. Like a crescentic shadow, it glides up the wall of the rushing wave. No shadow this, but a living thing, There is life here after all, and it is a bird, Watch though! The top of the wave is curling over. White water shows. The daring avian mariner is about to be annihilated in a mass of froth and foam. The wave breaks. The bird disappears. I shudder at its unhappy fate. Seconds pass. The wave goes by. I breathe a sigh of relief, for once again I see the brown crescent speeding along a trough, mounting another wave. Time after time I watched before I saw the skillful side slip by which this bird escaped the curling crest of the wave. With scarcely a second to spare, and with the water nearly touching its head, the shearwater - for such it was, - without facing about slid

sidewise, banked abruptly and glided away from the threatening breaker; all this with no perceptible moving of the wings. The most adept of aviators would have been proud to perform this feat.

Seen there was not one but several of these shearwaters tacking and veering amongst the waves. No, I could see some of them beating across the troubled waters, but apparently as soon as they found a suitable trough they went skimming and gliding along it, nearly shearing off the edges of the waves, as their name implies. I need not have feared for the destruction of such birds. They have made their peace with the spirits of the sea. They are intimately at home here, It is their abode.

All day long the shearwaters could be seen playing their games with the waves. For short periods a few would circle back and forth across the prow, or behind the stern, showing close attention to the ship's wake. But there was little tendency on their part to follow the ship, for these seafarers are in no way dependent upon man-made rubbish. Not once did I see a shearwater attempt to pick up garbage, though a great deal was dumped overboard. Of more interest to them, I feel sure, was whatever minute marine life was whirled to the surface by the churning propellers. For them this appears to be another aspect of the rough water which they seemed to love. I suspect that their game with the waves was really a search for food, the breaking waves, no doubt, like the ship's propellers, throwing up the small marine creatures that serve them for sustenance. Certainly when, the next day, the sea had settled to an oily calm, shearwaters were nowhere to be seen. On both crossings of the Atlantic, smooth water was associated with a scarcity of shearwaters, and their associates, the petrels, whilst with rough water they were invariably present.

It was difficult to get my fellow passengers, who were not bird conscious, to see that there were any birds at all amidst the riotous waves. So close to the water did the birds keep most of the time, that almost everyone found it hard to distinguish them. When they did manage to discern the birds, it was even harder to explain that those creatures were in no way lost, that they lived out here in the middle of the ocean quite normally most of their lives, going ashore but a few weeks each year on remote islands, for the purpose of nesting. One repeated question was "How do they rest?" They rest, of course, on the water, for which they are well equipped, though after watching them for days, one wonders when they do rest. They seem to be able to fly for hours with tireless ease. Only two or three times did I see a shearwater alight on the water; and perhaps an equal number of times the ship put up small flocks that were riding the waves as serenely as old squaw ducks.

Since such birds are usually to be seen only afar from land, they are counted rare by most observers. But though they may be rarely seen, save by those who go to sea, none the less shearwaters are far from rare. It is a moot question amongst ornithologists whether or not the greater shearwater (the species to which most of the shearwaters I saw belonged) is the most numerous bird in

the world. And its closest rivals would appear to be other oceanic birds, such as the murre and petrels. In other words, if these seldom seen marine birds flocked together and invaded our land, they would compare successfully in numbers with the swarms of starlings that range our cities and fields. Yet so vast is the ocean, and so widely distributed the food supply of such birds, that one rarely sees them in large flocks, except near their breeding grounds.

Shearwaters, however, are by no means the only birds to be seen on an Atlantic crossing. Petrels have already been mentioned. They are the birds that have long been known to imaginative sailors as Mother Carey's chickens. They are also called stormy petrels, an appropriate name which has no doubt arisen because of their association with rough water. To me, the most fitting designation for these graceful birds is sea swallows. They are, indeed, the swallows of the sea, for they have all the delicacy, the lightness and grace of flight, the speed, accuracy and mobility of their namesakes that comb the air above our home streams and ponds for gnats and mosquitoes. They skim along the troughs of waves on set wings, in much the same way as shearwaters, but more often they beat their way along on rapidly fluttering wings, flying up over the crashing wave rather than banking and side slipping, hovering for the moment, darting hither and yon. In reality, they are almost the same size as the barn swallows, being about the same proportions as purple martins. As they often gather in large flocks and conduct their hunting operations in companies, the illusion is then complete.

On the way over to Europe, we crossed the Newfoundland Banks during the first week in July. There petrels were common, but confined to a single species, the Leach's petrel. Coming back in early September, our course was more to the south. Petrels were again common in the western half of the ocean, but this time they were almost wholly Wilson's petrels, with only a few Leach's petrels. This is a normal summer distribution, except that in September the northern type would be moving southward, which would be the case with the Leach's petrels we saw off New England. I saw no petrels on the European side of the ocean, though they exist there too.

The several species of petrels are not easy to tell apart. As a group they are quickly recognizable, black swallow-like birds with white rumps, flitting amongst the waves. But when one tries from the deck of a pitching and tossing ship to discover if a particular petrel, which is darting through the trough of tumbling waves, has or has not a forked tail, he may do some considerable looking before he can be sure. The main, and always reliable, distinction between Leach's and Wilson's petrels is that the former has a forked tail and the latter has a square-cut tail. Given good lighting conditions, these differences are visible. Many Leach's petrels, for instance, seen from above in bright sunlight, prove to have a glossy brown plumage with a broad tan-colored "slash" cutting diagonally across each wing from shoulder joint to rump. The Wilson's petrel is blacker, as a similar "slash" which is much more restricted, and white. Unfortunately these

differences in plumage vary from individual to individual, and though in general evident, are not wholly reliable. As with gulls, there are variations of plumage according to age.

On the morning of July 5th, we were travelling through a dense fog, which had commenced on the previous day. About eleven o'clock a young lady who had noticed my bird watching, came rushing to tell me that she had a bird in a carton in her cabin. While she went to get the carton I puzzled over the possible identity of the captive, thinking it most likely was a robin that had travelled with us for three days. As soon as the carton was placed at my feet, and I looked down upon the bird, I knew that it was no robin, nor any bird I had any close acquaintance with before. About the size of a catbird, its plumage was a soft slate-blue in color. Long pointed wings were folded over the body so as to cross above the rump, and extend beyond the sides of the tail. When I saw the markedly forked tail and white rump, I realized that I was looking upon one of these elusive sea swallows, a Leach's petrel! And a sea swallow confined in a carton with bread, milk and crumbs offered for its sustenance!

The petrel did not seem particularly alarmed even when a considerable group of faces formed above its prison. Still it was clearly anxious to get free, for it started to tear at the loosened paper on the sides of the carton. Seeing this, I suggested that we loose the prisoner. I explained to the group that this was an oceanic bird, completely at home on the water, and therefore much better off there than in a carton with bread and milk. It took quite a lot of convincing since none of them had ever heard of birds that lived wholly at sea. One boy feared that the bird might be injured and could not fly. To show him that its wings were quite intact, I picked up the petrel. Never had I imagined that some day I would be able to say that I had held a live Leach's petrel in my hand. Yet, there it was. And even in my hand it showed no alarm, making no effort to escape, or peck at me.

In the hand we could see the white rump more clearly, and the forked brownish tail. The bill was prominent, being about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch long, was definitely hooked, the upper mandible coming down over the lower, ending in a finely pointed hook. No doubt this is very useful for picking up small marine life from the top of the water. The nostrils appeared as tubes on top of the upper mandible in the manner of pigeons. The feet, black in colour, were fully webbed. The eyes were dark and shiny like heads of some pins.

When all had had a good look, I placed the petrel on the rail. It stayed for a moment quite still, then took off, flying easily and gracefully, keeping well above the water until it disappeared into the fog. The white rump patch was much more strongly apparent when the bird was in flight than when in the hand. Doubtless this is because this part is stretched in flight and because it is no longer obscured by the wings. Also the flashing of the white in contrast with the dark body and wings draws attention to it. All were surprised by the wing spread of this small bird, the size of its wings in proportion to its body being

very large. This is quite comprehensible in a bird that spends so large a part of its life on the wing.

One of the boys in the group told me that this bird came aboard during the night, flying into the main lounge through an open lighted window, straight into the middle of a poker game! I didn't learn what kind of a hand of poker a petrel plays! This one certainly had a good poker face!

This occurrence reminded me of the way in which a lighthouse attracts land migrants. A lighted ship at sea would in a fog be a lure, or perhaps a blinding, confusing obstacle for a bird coming suddenly out of the fog, much as a lighthouse on the land. Reports of birds flying into lighted ships under such circumstances, are frequent.

As if to prove the truth of this generalization I was shown a second bird in a carton on the return trip. This was on September 1st when we were off the south coast of England. This wayfarer proved to be a migrant shorebird which had come aboard during the night somewhere in the North Sea, under very similar circumstances to the petrel. It also flew into a card game in the main lounge, only its taste was for bridge, not poker. Again it was a bird strange to me, a redshank. About the size and build of a stilt sandpiper, or a lesser yellowlegs, its chief distinctive feature was its coral red legs and feet. It acted rather stupefied. The boy who had it was sure it was injured, but there was no evidence of that. Perhaps the stupefaction was due to the fact that someone had fed it Dutch gin! On this occasion, I did not succeed in persuading the possessor to free his captive, and I had, with great reluctance, to see it carried back to his dormitory on D-deck. Later, however, I was glad to hear that the boy relented, and let the bird go. It flew away, I was told, without difficulty, probably landing on some French beach or marsh.

If lighted ships at sea provide a hazard for some birds, they offer a welcome refuge to a great many more. This was evident on both the eastward and westward passages, though more so in the latter, as we were in the season of fall migration. On the way over, somewhere between Cape Breton and Newfoundland, our ship offered haven to two robins and a pine siskin. One of the robins and the siskin stayed with us for one night, no doubt making for the Newfoundland shore when they left. The other robin stayed for three days. Where he went I have no idea, for he had a long way to go to any land by that time. Perhaps he made it back to Newfoundland from boat to boat. On the other hand he may have perished. It is hard to see what he could eat on such a trip, unless he picked up bits of bread or other leftovers from the decks of ships. I never saw him eat on board, though he was lively enough flying around the decks and rigging. Occasionally such land birds travel all the way across the ocean on ships, causing great furore amongst ornithologists wherever they happen to land. A good many of the accidental records of land birds from the opposite shores of the Atlantic, whether in Europe or America, are likely the result of such passages, for land birds would be

unable to cross the ocean purely by power of their own flight.

On the return trip on September 8th, our ninth day at sea, when we were still approximately 1000 miles from land, we began to pick up migrant land birds from North America. There had been fog on the previous day, but it had cleared at sundown. There were reports of storms to the west of us. It seems likely that these migrants were blown far off their normal course. How else can you explain the appearance so far to sea of the Cape May warblers? I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw these bright little mites foraging amongst the lifeboats for insects! They were lively enough, seeming as full of vigor as if they were gleaning amongst the birch trees of High Park. And here they showed a remarkable tameness, almost allowing themselves to be touched. I had to smile when one of the warblers in its hunting, darted between the heads of an amorous couple who were lying upon a life raft. It must have touched the cheeks of one or both of these people. They shot up, the boy waving his arms as if he had been stung by a bumble bee! The warbler wasn't in the least perturbed, going about its search quietly just on the other side of the raft. Either the same warbler, or the other, flew into a porthole on B-deck, directly into a men's washroom, where it created some stir until someone guided it out the porthole again.

The warblers were not alone this morning. Soon after finding them, I discovered two bobolinks among the life boats. In fall plumage, they repeated rather plaintively the well-known peent call which falls out of our home skies so often in early September. Unlike the warblers they were not active, and made no attempt to seek food so far as I could see. After an hour or so they disappeared.

While watching the bobolinks, I perceived two other birds flitting among the life boats, then up into the rigging. By the time I had identified them I had nearly ceased to be startled. Anything could happen. These birds were Baltimore orioles in female or immature plumage. Not as tame as the warblers, nor as apparently exhausted as the bobolinks, these two birds kept moving about the ship in a nervous manner for an hour or more until they settled in the rigging at the stern. Probably the settling factor was the arrival of still another migrant.

The small birds already noted must have come aboard during the night. They were certainly there early in the morning, and I did not see them come onto the ship. The newcomer was different. She came in mid-morning, across the sea from the north, flying abaft a light southwesterly breeze. Making directly for the ship, she alighted on the yard arm of the stern mast, a beautifully plumaged female pigeon hawk. A few minutes rest and the little falcon was cocking its head at the small birds already aboard. Possibly the bobolinks took off at this time. The orioles sought cover, one on the deck amongst the coiled hawsers, the other underneath the yard arm where it joined the mast. The latter bird clearly

was the most promising victim, for the falcon sat on the yard arm for over an hour eyeing the oriole. But this bird realized its security and did not move. Finally one of the Cape May warblers darted over the side of the ship. At once the falcon quit its perch, plunged down with terrific speed after the warbler. Both birds seemed about to be swallowed up in the ocean when the warbler twisted and zig-zagged along the side of the ship just above the water. The falcon followed every move and the two vanished around the stern. I rushed to the other side of the ship, expecting fully to see the falcon rise up with the warbler in its talons. No, indeed. The falcon soon came into view, but without the warbler. It was not seen again. Most likely it was scared away from the ship, and took off over the ocean. The other warbler also disappeared about this time. The pigeon hawk returned to the mast to watch the oriole, which hadn't budged. In the next few hours the hawk several times left the mast to fly in a circle around the ship, probably in search of other potential victims. It would be interesting to know whether this small hawk was also blown to sea, or if some hawks in their migration southward along the coast visit passing ships in the hope of finding easy captives among exhausted land bird migrants. I would think it most likely that this falcon, which lives very largely on small birds, had been following a flock of mixed migrants, and had been blown off its course, along with its intended prey. During mid-afternoon the orioles vanished. Shortly thereafter the falcon left the ship and flew southwestward, keeping low over the water.

Four times during the day, I saw other migrants approach the ship, and all as if they intended to alight. None of these birds did, however. Three of them were shore birds, and one was a bank swallow. The first, a semi-palmated sandpiper, showed the least interest in the ship, flying alongside for awhile, then speeding ahead in the direction of land. A semi-palmated plover I detected by its call, which I heard some time before I spotted the bird. This fellow very clearly wanted to come aboard, several times diving down almost to the deck only to veer off at the last moment. Finally it too sped on westward. The third shorebird, a Hudsonian curlew, circled the ship twice before resuming its flight, in its case to the south. The bank swallow was more persistent. Repeatedly it battled the stiff upcurrents along the ship's stern, and several times I thought it would come to rest on the mast. The falcon had gone, so there was no deterrent of that sort. For nearly four hours the swallow kept along with us, until it too left us and vanished in a westerly direction.

On this same day there were migrants that paid no attention to the ship. Three times I saw a long line of Hudsonian curlews flying overhead, going due south. Once it was a flock of golden plover. These birds were on their normal migration route, straight south from Newfoundland or Nova Scotia to South America. Unless they encountered a very severe storm, they would have no need of rest, hence their indifference to the vessel. This astounding flight overseas of curlew and plover which I had read about but never seen before, is a thrilling sight to see.

Three days before, on September 5th, in mid-ocean, I saw another example, even more exciting, of oceanic migration. On that day we met three flocks of Arctic terns, travelling eastward from their summer homes in North America to Europe and their winter abode in South Africa or the Antarctic. Next spring many such birds will return to their summer homes by way of the American coast. This circling of the Atlantic ocean is the longest known route of migration of any bird in the world. Only in recent years have ornithologists become certain that such was the route of the Arctic tern. It was, therefore, intensely satisfying to see this strange flight taking place. Not far from one of the flocks of terns were two long-tailed jaegers, a bird I had never seen before, but one which is well known to harry these terns in their summer homes in the Arctic. Evidently it follows them for long distances on their migrations too.

On September 10th, about 500 miles to sea, I saw a ruddy turnstone pass the ship. There were no land birds abroad that day. The next day, September 11th, when a strong northwesterly wind was blowing, we were again visited by land migrants. Our position at the time was around 150-200 miles off New England. The visitors were six cedar waxwings, two mourning doves, a flicker and a Blackburnian warbler. One waxwing flew off the ship to the southward, thought better of it, and then had a terrific battle to get back onto the ship against the strong wind. Several times it would reach the side of the vessel, only to be beaten down almost into the water by the air currents. How it survived the drenching it evidently got from spray, I do not understand, but evidently after nearly half an hour's struggle, it regained its position on a life boat. Shortly after the waxwing's success, I saw another "bird" come fluttering down the side of the ship from the boat deck. At first I believed it to be another waxwing, but as soon as I saw it in my binoculars I realized that it was no bird at all but a very reddish bat! Since bats migrate as well as birds, it is perhaps not strange that they should seek refuge on passing ships in the same way as birds. However, I was astonished to see this creature. It too had quite a fight to recover its place on the boat, but it eventually succeeded.

In the afternoon, when the wind had died down, the sea grown calm, and when we were not more than 40 or 50 miles off Long Island shore, our morning migrants left us. But another, a noble bird, appeared. Flying alongside the boat for some distance, coming close, then flying away only to return, this visitor was quite at ease. Finally, he deigned to alight in the foremast, giving us one of the finest views I have ever had of His Highness, the royal falcon, the perigrine. Satisfied, after an hour's surveillance of ship and passengers, he left, distancing the ship with utmost ease, and vanishing into the setting sun.

It has seemed worthwhile to concentrate my remarks upon certain birds and observations. In conclusion it may be well

V G.

to give the complete list of the birds which I was able to see from shipboard. On the way over I sailed from Quebec on June 30, reaching Rotterdam on July 10. On the return trip I left Rotterdam on August 31 and reached New York on September 11. The birds are listed in the order in which they were encountered. On the way over they were as follows: black guillemot, double-crested cormorant, herring gull, common eider, gaunet, razor-billed auk, common murre, Leach's petrel, pine siskin, robin, fulmar, sooty shearwater, osprey, greater shearwater, greater black backed gull, lesser black backed gull, European guillemot, shag, common gull, European black headed gull, common tern, rock dove. On the return trip they were as follows: European black headed gull, herring gull, common gull, lesser black backed gull, greater black backed gull, gaunet, greater shearwater, redshank, Northern skua, Arctic tern, fulmar, long-tailed jaeger, Manx shearwater, Wilson's petrel, Hudsonian curlew, Cape May warbler, Baltimore oriole, Golden plover, bobolink, pigeon hawk, semi-palmated sandpiper, bank swallow, semi-palmated plover, ruddy turnstone, Cory's shearwater, cedar waxwing, mourning dove, common tern, flicker, Blackburnian warbler, peregrine falcon, herring full, roseate tern, laughing gull. A number were seen which were not identified.

Richard M. Saunders,

Editor.

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