

## **BBC PELAGIC 6.27.10**

Marshall Iliff

The first of this year's deep-water pelagic trips by the Brookline Bird Club (BBC) was a great success. Although we did not find any unusual birds, we did have spectacular marine mammals (including a mega-rarity), as well as a very rare sea turtle and an overall great pelagic experience. There were lots of birds around all day.

We departed Hyannis aboard the Helen H at 4:00 am and within a half-hour it started getting light and we saw our first seabird, a Cory's Shearwater, well within Nantucket Sound. We passed just east of Nantucket on a direct route to Veatch Canyon, at which point we slowed down and cruised into deeper water while laying a chum slick. After a big loop offshore, we turned and crossed the Continental Shelf just west of Hydrographer Canyon and headed back towards Hyannis.

Highlights of the trip were many. There was a light SW or WSW wind in the morning, but for much of the day the winds were negligible offshore. Seas were very light, making it very easy to spot birds on the water. On the way out we had a nice group of birds over a small pod of Common Dolphins, including all four species of shearwaters. Before reaching the continental shelf, we turned around for a sea turtle and we all had great studies as the small animal swam alongside the boat and provided great looks. The scute pattern and scalation of the head revealed it to be a GREEN SEA TURTLE, a rare species this far north (Loggerhead, Leatherback, and Ridley are the three more likely species in Massachusetts, and this was a first for these trips). Some lucky people got to see it tangle with a shark briefly, and after the tussle, the turtle swam right towards us revealing an obvious bite mark in its shell. We also noticed a bright banded pilotfish under the turtle. Both the fish and the bite mark are visible in photos such as this one:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jrtrimble/4742996574/in/set-72157624377613380/>

From just beyond Nantucket Shoals until the continental Shelf we were seeing lots of Leach's Storm-Petrels, so had great opportunities to study their field marks at sea. Our total of 138 was the highest ever for these trips. The species was most common over the deep water beyond the Shelf, where we had up to 40 in some half-hour segments. Best of all, they responded to our chum and came right in to the back of the boat; Luke Seitz and others got great images of this usually hard-to-photograph species:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/51533299@N05/4741240556/in/photostream/>  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/51533299@N05/4741241856/in/photostream/>

Overall chumming worked great in the offshore waters, although we were unable to chum in any mega-rarities, it was certainly a joy to see so many storm-petrels and shearwaters around the boat during the entirety of our

time in the waters far offshore.

But the highlight of all were the whales. After a couple distant spouts, we spotted a baleen whale that was moving really fast and we sped up to keep pace. Its identification was elusive to us at first, and it was not until photos came back that we realized it was a small BLUE WHALE. See photos here:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jrtrimble/4743004238/in/set-72157624377613380/>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ryser915/4739377022/in/set-72157624244791609/>

This species is seen only very rarely off New England, and this was unquestionably our rarest find of the trip. Amazingly, we got photos of a second animal about an hour later.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ryser915/4739373462/in/set-72157624244791609/>

A bit later we had more excitement with a Fin Whale and then a close SPERM WHALE that provided great close looks for all on board. Photos by Ryan Schain:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ryser915/4739364730/in/set-72157624244791609/>

On the way back in we had nice looks at Risso's Dolphins and Pilot Whales, and the finale was a group of 450 Common Dolphins that completely surrounded us with their attendant shearwaters.

#### TOTALS:

Greater Shearwater - 459

Cory's Shearwater - 82 (all seen well consistent with *C. d. borealis*, although a couple interesting individuals were photographed with thinner bills and slightly more white in primaries)

Greater/Cory's Shearwater - 7

Manx Shearwater - 24 (a high count for this trip; one bird was far offshore beyond the Continental Shelf--an area we don't often see this species.

See this photo by Luke Seitz:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/51533299@N05/4740605001/in/photostream/>)

Sooty Shearwater - 27

Wilson's Storm-Petrel - 187

Leach's Storm-Petrel - 137 (perhaps the avian highlight of the trip was the high number of Leach's; we had many birds coming in to chum right behind the boat and eating suet from the surface of the water)

Herring Gull (American) - 2

Great Black-backed Gull - 1

Common Tern - 18 (two birds over deep water)

Pomarine Jaeger - 1 (immature, apparent 1st-summer, bird pursued and seen at

a moderate distance)  
Northern Gannet - 7 (all nearshore)  
Common Loon - 6 (all near Nantucket)

MAMMALS etc.

Short-beaked Common Dolphin - 450 (great groups of several hundred)  
Pilot Whale - 17 (one area with several small groups)  
BLUE WHALE - 2 (very rare; two young animals seen well and photographed. One seen was "running" at 16 kts and breaking the surface dramatically with the large head, almost porpoising!)  
Fin Whale - 1  
SPERM WHALE - 3 (two distant, but great looks and photos of one cooperative animal seen by all. A rare and special species for these offshore trips)  
Minke Whale - 3  
Risso's Dolphin - 8  
GREEN SEA TURTLE - 1 (small individual was attacked by a shark while we watching and later had a chunk taken out of its shell!)

FISH etc.

Half-beak - x (1 school)  
Yellowfin Tuna - 4 (2 seen, 2 caught; everyone went home with fresh tuna steaks!)  
Bluefin Tuna - 1 (caught)  
Blue Shark - ~8  
shark sp. - ~6  
Mola mola - 2  
Portuguese Man-o-war - 1

Thanks as always to the BBC (and Ida in particular) for making sure this trip went, to Capt. Joe, Matt the mate, and the rest of the Helen H for these consistently professional and accommodating trips. Every data point we get from these far offshore waters is fascinating. It seems that Audubon's Shearwater may not show up here until later (the earliest records in Veit and Petersen are mid-July), and perhaps the same is true of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel.