

# **STRAWBERRY ISLE MARINE RESEARCH SOCIETY**

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**Scuttle Butt – October 1994**

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Black-footed Albatross takes off

photo R. Palm Black-footed Albatross

## **500 FATHOMS**

“Something to do that has not been done before”. Thirty years ago that was no problem, but these days it’s not so easy, studies have been done on everything imaginable. On reading a Canadian Wildlife Service publication we noticed that deep ocean birds off our west coast have never been monitored during the winter months. “Ah ha, let’s do that”.

In order to take this activity on some guide lines must be followed to give the research any credibility. We laid out a transect with mile “0” being Wilf Rocks (an entrance to Tofino Harbour), straight out over the continental shelf, past the continental slope and on to the abyss. This end of the transect is 36 kn. miles offshore in over 500 fathoms of water. Birds are recorded by species, numbers, distance from shore, depth of water and whether they are on the water or in the air. Water temperature is recorded every 5 miles.

For a birder, running offshore is like visiting another country. The familiar inshore birds very quickly disappear as the pelagic (open ocean) birds start showing up. The coast line sinks below the horizon, and the ocean swells stretch themselves

out as the sea floor's influence is lost in the deep ocean. Being this far offshore in an 8 meter open boat brings home a feeling for just how vast the Pacific is. On an overcast day the grey sea dissolves into the sky so you feel as though you're a tiny speck in an infinite grey sphere.

In the fall, the first birds to appear on the transects are the Sooty Shearwaters, small groups of Common Murres, Cassin's Auklets and a few Pacific Loons winging by, maybe a Pomarine Jaeger or two.

At about twenty miles we are seeing lots of shearwaters screaming along just inches above the water, rising with each undulating swell like some high speed video game character. Not only are they more in numbers but also species: Sooty, Short-Tailed, Pink-Footed, "There's a Flesh-Footed".

Now we're seeing large numbers of Northern Fulmars (both light and dark morphs). The fulmars are very aggressive and virtually fearless, if you throw out a food scraps there is a battle royal for the prize. You put away your long lens for these guys; if there is even a hint of food they're within arms length of the boat.

Black-Footed Albatross, like great soaring kites gliding past the boat, "Oh, a few are landing on the water with the fulmars". Though not as brave, albatross will come within twenty feet of the boat; they seem to look around in a bit of a stupor wondering what all the fuss is about. Landing seems to be a little scary for these guys and taking off looks like it's the first time they ever tried it; wings thrashing, head bobbing, web feet scrambling for a grip. They seem to be constantly on the verge of wiping out.

During the winter months offshore things really quiet down, all the fulmars are gone, no jaegers and there are only a few shearwaters about. Still seeing the odd Cassin's Auklet, more Common Murres than in the fall, small groups of Marbled and unidentified murrelets. Interestingly there are still Black-Footed Albatross and better yet, almost as many Laysan Albatross. The Laysan seems to be a bit more curious than the Black-Footed in that you see his white head coming straight at you from a quarter mile or so away. It was like a game of chicken, "Is he going to turn?". At the last instant (perhaps 4 meters) he banks away and very quickly is gone and there is no mooching him back, his regal bearing makes me wonder if he isn't in fact insulted by such junk food offerings.

A wonderful bonus on these winter transects has been marine mammals, on both the Dec. and Jan.. trips we saw a female Northern Fur Seal. Females are about the same length as our Harbour Seals but are much more slender with longer fins and darker in colour. These animals were seen basking on the surface without a care in the world, we were able to pull over close enough to see their Doberman Pincer like ears and the beige streak on her throat.

Grey Whales, still on the West Coast, here it is January. Not in the feeding grounds where you'd expect them but out here more than ten miles from shore just sauntering along down the coast. It's too late for these animals to make it to the breeding grounds in Mexico, party's over, the Greys are already starting to head out on their northern migration. These whales that we are seeing would be non-breeding, likely mothers with last years calves or very old animals.

"What is that off in the distance, I thought I saw a splash, yes there's another, heading this way". "Dalls porpoises, these guys are great, don't slow down, we're only doing about 20 knots, they'll catch up". Sure enough here they are. Dalls are deceptively fast for such chunky animals and they're only about two meters long. They must not have to work very hard for a living because they always seem to have time for a little race. There are four of them with us for about 15 minutes leaping through both the bow and stern waves. One cannot help but feel a trace of some sort of prehistoric kinship with these animals; we know each other from somewhere.