Pelagic Birding in the Southern California Bight — Part II

by Todd McGrath and Jon Feenstra

Part one of this article which appeared in issue 71:5 of Western Tanager described the oceanographic environment of the waters off southern California. The diversity of this habitat and, especially, its placement between southbound and northbound currents allows it to host over 28 regularly occurring species of pelagic birds. In addition, the Channel Islands and Islas los Coronados provide breeding habitat for multiple seabirds, several of which are either endemic to the area (e.g. Xantus’s Murrelet) or are at the northern or southern limit of their breeding range (e.g. Black Storm-Petrel or Rhinoceros Auklet). A total of 53 pelagic species have been documented in the Southern California Bight. The following are individual accounts describing the status and occurrence of those species in the waters between Pt. Arguello and the Mexican border. There is still much to learn about the distribution of pelagic species in our region, but this guide should give those wishing to venture offshore a better idea of what, where, and when the various birds may be encountered.

Laysan Albatross Phoebastria immutabilis — Uncommon; Oct-May; usually well offshore near the continental shelf. Rare inside the Channel Islands. This species appears to be increasing in our region, and since the early 1980s has established breeding colonies on several islands off Mexico (Dunlap 1988). Guadalupe I. is the nearest breeding island to California (roughly 200 miles to the south), and this Mexican population is the likely source of many of the sightings in southern California waters.

Black-footed Albatross Phoebastria nigripes — Uncommon to rare well offshore over the California Current. May be absent in fall and early winter. Usually more common at the northern end of our area. This species declined substantially in southern California in recent years. The 112 seen off Pt. Loma, 6 Aug 1958 (Unitt, 2004) are more than one would expect anywhere in our region today, including at the edge of the continental shelf. It is possible this species has shifted its range northward as the warm water trend off southern California has reduced ocean productivity.

Short-tailed Albatross Phoebastria albatrus — Although common over 100 years ago, there are only three recent records south of Point Arguello. One roughly 90 nm west of San Diego 28 Aug 1977 was the first modern record for California (Luther, 1980). Another was off the NW tip of Santa Barbara I. 19 Feb-22 Mar 2002 (Cole & McCaskie 2004). One a few hundred yards from the Prisoner’s Harbor dock on Santa Cruz I. 5 Jul 2005 is the most recent record for our area. Any albatross seen inside the Channel Islands should be closely scrutinized, as this is perhaps the most likely species close to shore. The continued recovery of this species should result in additional records for southern California waters.

Northern Fulmar Fulmarus glacialis — Irregularly uncommon to common fall and winter visitor; (Oct-Apr). May be common well into summer after exceptional flight years. Fall of 2003 was the most dramatic recent flight year with hundreds visible from shore in October and November. 1976 was another very high flight year for the species (Garrett & Dunn, 1981) A few may be present well offshore at any season even in years when they are absent near shore. Most birds seen in our area are gray or brown birds, but white forms are seen occasionally.

Murphy’s Petrel Pterodroma ultima — Irregularly uncommon to rare spring visitor well offshore; April-June. Recent high counts included 66 on 18-20 and 25 on 25-27 Apr 2003, and 10 on 15-16 Apr 2005. Occasionally seen just west of San Miguel I. or from other Channel Islands, but most often recorded in deep water over the continental shelf.

Mottled Petrel Pterodroma inexpectata — Very rare visitor Nov-Mar well offshore along the continental shelf. Extremely rare close to shore. Its true status is difficult to ascertain as few boats venture out to the continental shelf during the winter months. There are five accepted records: 30 Dec 1981 Pt Magu VEN, 15 Nov 1989 123 nm SW of San Miguel I. SBA, 17 Nov 1989 61 nm SW of San Miguel I. SBA, 11 Feb 1993 193 nm NW of Pt Arguello SBA, 71 nm W of Pt. Arguello, and 1 Apr 1993 180 nm SW of San Nicolas I. VEN.

Cook’s Petrel Pterodroma cookii — An uncommon to rare visitor to the deep waters off the continental shelf (Apr-Nov), with a peak in July and August. Numbers fluctuate year to year, and may not be present every year. This species is regular off western Mexico (Howell & Webb 1995), and southern and central California probably represents the northern edge of this species regular range.

Stejneger’s Petrel Pterodroma longirostris — Very rare visitor to the ocean beyond the continental shelf. Probably most likely in late fall (Nov), but may also occur in early spring or summer. May be more common offshore beyond the 200 mile limit, but as with many of these deepwater species, the distribution is still poorly known. There are three records for our region: 14 Nov 1990 approximately 152 nm SW of San Miguel I. SBA, 4 July 1992 approximately 153 nm SW of San Nicolas I. VEN, and 10 Jul 1992 approximately 189 nm WSW of San Miguel I. SBA.

Galapagos/Hawaiian Petrel Pterodroma phaeopygia/sandwichensis — A very rare visitor Apr-Aug, with three records for our region: 31 Aug 1996 24 nm SW of San Miguel I. SBA, 28 Apr 2001 29 nm SW of Pt. Arguello SBA, and 25 Jul 2001 100 miles W of Pt. Conception SBA. Based on current knowledge it is not possible to separate these two species in the field, but Hawaiian may be more likely based on range. These two species were formerly known as Dark-rumped Petrel.

Bulwer’s Petrel Bulweria bulwerii — Very rare visitor to warm waters in our region. Two sightings: one not accepted by the CBRC and one pending. One, 10 Jul 1993 at the Whitewater River delta Salton Sea RIV was not accepted by the CBRC and would have been a first for North America (Patten et al. 2003). However the authors believe the details are sufficiently convincing to include here. Another seen 4 Sep 2003, 30 nm S of San Clemente I. is still circulating. There is one accepted record for California of a bird photographed on Monterey Bay 26 July 1988 (Erickson & Hamilton 2001).

Streaked Shearwater Calonectris leucomeles — One, 7 Sep 2002 4-5 miles S of Sandstone Pt. on Santa Cruz I. SBA is the only accepted record for the area (Cole & McCaskie 2004), but two other reports that same fall may also

1 Reprint from Western Tanager 2005 September/October
have been correct. Late August to mid October is the peak period of occurrence for this species in northern California.

**Pink-footed Shearwater* Puffinus creatopus**  
A common migrant and summer resident, with a few present all year, particularly around the northern Channel Islands. Pink-footed Shearwaters begin arriving in southern California in early April and numbers build through the summer, peaking in Sep-Oct, when thousands may be present around the northern Channel Islands. Some birds may linger through the winter. Often visible from shore, sometimes in the hundreds when wind conditions are favorable.

**Flesh-footed Shearwater* Puffinus carneipes**  
An uncommon fall, rare winter, and spring visitor. Most reports are in the area south of the northern Channel Islands, but occasionally seen in the Santa Barbara Channel. High counts include six+ in the San Pedro Channel 22 Nov 1968 (Garrett & Dunn, 1981) and five around the northern Channel Islands 20 Nov 2004. The high numbers on these late dates suggests late Nov may be a peak period for this species in our area.

**Wedge-tailed Shearwater* Puffinus pacificus**  
– Very rare fall visitor, should be looked for from Aug-Oct. There is only one accepted record for our region, a bird photographed 31 Jul 1988 at the mouth of the Whitewater River at the Salton Sea. Five additional reports for our area have been rejected by the CBRC. All three other accepted California records are from Monterey Bay, probably in part the result of the excellent coverage that area receives in the fall. The Salton Sea bird likely traveled up the Gulf of California, and was probably from the breeding population in Mexico. The provenance of birds further north is difficult to determine, and could be from Mexico, Hawaii, or one of the breeding colonies in the southern hemisphere.

**Wilson’s Storm-Petrel* Oceanodroma leucorhoa**  
– Common spring through fall (Apr-Oct) usually well offshore. The taxonomy and distribution of Leach’s Storm-Petrels is a complicated matter in southern California and western Mexico. Although some controversy still exists, four subspecies are generally recognized (Power & Ainley, 1986) all of which may occur in our area. Nominate *O. l. leucorhoa* breed from Alaska to the Farallons, and may also be the subspecies present in the small breeding colonies on Prince I. off San Miguel I, and Santa Barbara I., the only known breeding locations in southern California. This subspecies almost always has an extensively white-rump, although there is some variation in the amount. *O. l. chapmani* breed on Islas los Coronados and Islas San Benitos off Baja, Mexico. Birds from the Coronados have highly variable rump colors, ranging from nearly as white as nominate birds to all dark. Most seem to have at least some small amounts of white. Birds from the Islas San Benitos are almost all completely dark-rumped. Birds from these colonies can be observed in the southern part of our region spring through fall. A post-breeding dispersal northward results in large numbers of these variably dark-rumped birds present as far north as Arguello Canyon in August and September. There are also two subspecies that breed at different seasons on and around Isla Guadalupe, and some authorities believe that one or both of these subspecies should be elevated to full species status. The winter breeding *O. l. cheimomnestes* is primarily white-rumped and there is no current criteria for separating this form from nominate Leach’s at sea, therefore it’s presence in California waters would be difficult to establish. Summer breeding *O. l. soccorroensis* may be either light or dark-rumped, and average smaller than any other population of Leach’s (Power & Ainley, 1986). A review of specimens at both the San Diego Museum of Natural History and the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History showed that the white rump patch on summer breeding birds was narrower, resembling the patch on Band-rumped Storm-Petrel. The overall coloration of this subspecies was a blackish-brown, noticeably darker than other white-rumped Leach’s. Several reports of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel from California (including one accepted and then removed by the CBRC) were likely this species.

**Black-vented Shearwater* Puffinus opisthomelas**  
– A common to abundant fall and winter visitor, (Sep-Apr) Rare at other seasons. In very warm water years the species may arrive as early as July. Black-vented Shearwaters frequent the shallow nearshore waters, and are often visible from land. May be seen in the thousands from places like La Jolla, Pt. Fermin, and Pt. Mugu during the fall and early winter. This species seems to be seen in increasing numbers off southern California, perhaps due to warming of the waters off Baja, Mexico, resulting in a more northerly dispersal of this species. Leucistic Black-vented shearwaters are frequently encountered in our area (Garrett 1990), and can be mistaken for rarer species by the unawares observer.

**Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel* Oceanodroma furcata**  
– Rare but occasionally irruptive.
form. Although no published criteria for separating this form at sea has been established, the smaller size, overall darker color and more restricted white rump may allow identification to subspecies of some birds by experienced observers. This subspecies should be looked for at the southern end of our region well offshore, primarily in late-summer.

McGrath tentatively identified five individuals of this subspecies at the very southern end of the ABA area in early September 2003. Much more work is needed to clarify both the taxonomy and at sea distribution of this species off southern California.

**Ashy Storm-Petrel** *Oceanodroma homochroa* – Fairly common in spring through fall (Apr-Oct) mostly in the northern Channel Islands but declining. This species is one of the rarest storm-petrels in the world, and essentially a breeding endemic to California. Roughly 40% of the world’s known population breeds on the northern Channel Islands with substantial colonies near San Miguel 1. at Prince I. (1154 birds), Santa Barbara I. (874 birds) and nearby Sutil I. (586 birds) (Carter, 1992). Over the past ten years this species has been recorded less frequently by pelagic birding trips in our region suggesting that the species is declining in our area, or has changed its preferred areas of feeding.

**Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel** *Oceanodroma tethys* – A very rare summer and fall visitor around the Channel Islands and further offshore. This species is present in small numbers around San Nicolas I. and south. Rare but regular to the northern Channel Islands. Is regular in spring at the very south edge of our region. (Multi-day trips out of San Diego have recorded this species is small numbers each of the last three Aprils.) A few may be present at the southern edge of our region year round.

**Red-tailed Tropicbird** *Phaethon rubricauda* – Rare but regular visitor well offshore Jul-Jan. About 14 records for our area, most in Aug-Sep, with a few in January. Most of the sightings for our area have been from research cruises more than 100 miles from shore, although there is a record from Bolsa Chica 10 Jul 1999. The most recent record was 6 Sep 2003 about 200 nm SW of San Clemente I. LA seen on a multi-day Searcher pelagic trip.

**Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* – Rare but increasing visitor. Most records from the coast or Channel Islands. Prior to 1992, there was only one Masked Booby record for our area. Since then there have been six additional records that are definitely this species and another four that were treated as Masked/Nazca booby. Bill color is currently the only known criteria for separating this recently split pair (yellow in Masked vs. orange in Nazca) and this bill coloration is not present in the first year, making young birds impossible to separate in the field with current knowledge. Although Nazca has yet to be recorded for certain in our region, an immature came aboard a fishing boat in Mexican waters 27 May 2001 and rode the boat back to San Diego, where the bird was placed into rehabilitation. (Garrett & Wilson, 2001)

**Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* – Rare but increasing coastal vagrant. Now annual along the southern California coast primarily as a post-breeding wanderer in late Jul-Oct (most records Aug-Sep). Most are seen along the coast or on the Channel Islands. An abundant breeder in the Gulf of California, this species appears also to be expanding its range along the coast, and has now bred successfully on the Islas los Coronado’s. This species was formerly most common in California at the Salton Sea, but has not been recorded there since 1990 (Patten et al. 2003)

**Red-footed Booby** *Sula sula* – Very rare vagrant with eight records for our region four in Oct, with one each for Feb, May, Aug. and Nov. This tropical booby breeds only as close as the Islas Revillagigedo in southern Mexico. All sightings have been coastal, around the Channel Islands, with a couple seen well offshore on research cruises. Both
the white and brown color morphs have occurred in our region. There is about one sighting every three to four years.

**South Polar Skua Catharacta maccormicki** – Uncommon spring (May-Jun) and fall (Sep-early Nov) migrant. Rare summer visitor. This species is generally found well offshore, but may sometimes enter the Santa Barbara Channel when large numbers of tubenoses are present. Probably most common in late May to early June and mid-Sep to mid-Oct. Typical single day counts of two to four birds can be expected at the peak of migration. Very rarely seen from shore, and observers must be careful to eliminate dark Pomarine Jaegers which can superficially resemble South Polar Skua.

**Pomarine Jaeger Stercorarius pomarinus** – Common spring (Apr-May) and fall (late Aug-early Nov) migrant. Uncommon winter and rare summer visitor. Pomarine Jaegers are often the most common jaeger seen off southern California. They can sometimes be seen from shore, especially during periods when shearwaters are also visible from land. This species also ranges well out into the deep waters along the continental shelf.

**Parasitic Jaeger Stercorarius parasiticus** – Fairly common spring (mid Apr-late May) and fall (late Aug-Oct) transient. Uncommon but regular winter visitor. Rare in summer. The Parasitic Jaeger relies on Royal, Elegant, and Common Terns for food, so is often close to the coast, and is frequently seen from shore. A few migrants can generally be found well offshore, but this species is often absent from the zone of water in between. In winter is often seen around harbors, or estuaries where Royal Terns feed in numbers. As with Pomarine Jaeger, summering birds are likely non-breeding immatures.

**Long-tailed Jaeger Stercorarius longicaudus** – Uncommon fall transient (mid Aug-early Oct) rare later in fall and very rare in spring (May). The Long-tailed Jaeger is the most pelagic of the jaegers and is rarely seen close to shore. It is often seen in the company of Arctic Terns (its main source of food). This species is often seen south of the northern Channel Islands or west of San Miguel I. in the northern part of our region. It is very rare in the Santa Barbara Channel. In the southern part of the region it may be seen inside the Channel Islands, but usually still well offshore. Typical single day high counts during the peak of fall migration would be five to ten, although numbers of about 20 have been recorded.

**Black-legged Kittiwake Rissa tridactyla** – Like the Northern Fulmar, the Black-legged Kittiwake is an irregular late fall and winter visitor (Nov-Mar) in our area. It may be present in large numbers or virtually absent. During “invasion” years they often are seen from shore in good numbers particularly in late-winter and spring. After good flight years some birds may linger along the coast well into summer.

**Sabine’s Gull Xema sabini** – Uncommon spring (mid-Apr–early Jun, most common in May) and fairly common fall migrant (mid-Aug–mid-Oct) offshore. This pelagic gull is rarely seen from shore along the coast, but is rare but regular inland in the fall. Seems to be seen more south of the northern Channel Islands, but is occasionally seen in the Santa Barbara Channel.

**Arctic Tern Sterna paradisaea** – Common fall migrant (Aug-Sep) and uncommon to rare spring migrant in fall. Casual early migrants may be seen in late April or early May, and a few lingering fall birds may be found into October. Very rarely seen onshore and inland, and care must be taken to eliminate Common Tern.

**Common Murre Uria aalge** – Irregularly common to uncommon in winter and spring. Nov-May. It is an “invading” species with numbers fluctuating widely from one year to another. Breeding has been documented historically on the rocks near San Miguel I. and it breeds regularly to the north of our area on other offshore rocky cliffs. Winter sightings are typically close to the Channel Islands and occasionally from shore during migration. In some years Common Murres may linger in the area through the summer. Tens of thousands were present off southern California during the invasion of 1979-1980 (Garrett & Dunn, 1981).

**Thick-billed Murre Uria lomvia** – One record. A Thick-billed Murre photographed off the Palos Verdes Peninsula 21 May 1994 is the only California record south of Monterey Bay. All other accepted records for California fall mid-Aug-early Apr, with most records Sep-Dec.

**Pigeon Guillemot Cepphus columba** – A breeding bird of the rocky cliffs of the northern Channel Islands and, at least historically, south to Santa Barbara I. and the rocky coast of the mainland. Birds are typically seen late winter to late summer near breeding grounds and in coastal waters north of Los Angeles County. Individuals largely leave the area in winter with only a few recorded along the coast in most years.

**Marbled Murrelet Brachyramphus marmoratus** – Breeding in the redwoods of the Pacific Northwest, Marbled Murrelet is a rare winter vagrant to southern California. Unlike most other alcids occurring here, this one is more likely to be found in sheltered coastal waters such as harbors and inlets. As with many other alcids a large invasion in the winter of 1980 resulted in many birds occurring along the coast. (Garrett & Dunn, 1981)

**Kittlitz’s Murrelet Brachyramphus brevirostris** – One record. A juvanel plumed bird was found on the beach in La Jolla SD on Aug 16, 1969. Its natural occurrence in southern California was initially considered questionable as the date is extremely early for the natural vagrancy of a juvenile alcid so far from its far northern breeding grounds. (Garrett & Dunn, 1981), but the bird showed no signs of being held in captivity and was later accepted by the CBRC (Binford 1985).

**Xantus’s Murrelet Synthliboramphus hypoleucus** – One of the world’s rarest alcids and an endemic breeder to the Southern California Bight. Two subspecies are represented – the northern Endomychura hypoleuca scrippsi and the southern nominate Endomychura hypoleuca hypoleuca. E.h. scrippsi breeds commonly on the northern Channel Islands and (mostly) Santa Barbara I. The species has made a striking comeback after intense rat eradication programs on Anacapa I. After breeding, in the summer, birds disperse as far as British Columbia and central Mexico (Whitworth, 2000). In late summer and fall E.h. hypoleuca, which breeds primarily on Guadalupe I. off Baja California, is very rarely found in the waters beyond central California. Both subspecies nest in rock crevices under bushes. E.h. hypoleuca is best distinguished from E.h. scrippsi by a white area extending above the eye.

**Craveri’s Murrelet Synthliboramphus craveri** – Irregularly uncommon to rare in late summer and fall (late Jul-early Oct) to waters far offshore. High counts of tens of birds typically occur in Sep with a recent showing of nearly 30, Sep 6, 2003 between the Santa Rosa-Cortez Ridge and Cherry Banks. Although, in many years none are seen. This species breeds off central Mexico. It is best distinguished from Xantus’s Murrelet by gray underwings (white in Xantus’s) that can be seen in flight. Vocalizations can also be useful when heard. Craveri’s has a trill, where Xantus’s Murrelet (scrippsi) has a six-
eight note whistle.

**Ancient Murrelet Synthliboramphus antiquus** – A rare winter (Nov-Mar) visitor to nearshore waters of southern California. Although not regular, it has been recorded annually in recent years. During invasions, such as the 1979-1980 alcid influx, tens were seen along the coast between Santa Barbara and Orange Counties. (Garrett & Dunn, 1981) The most recent high count is of eight between the Palos Verdes Peninsula and Catalina I. L.A. It is one of the few alcid species that is occasionally found inland (several records for the Salton Sea).

**Cassin’s Auklet Ptychoramphus aleuticus** – Uncommon in summer and fairly common to common Nov-Jun beginning several miles offshore. This species is at the southern end of its breeding range in the Southern California Bight. Here it is a common nesting bird of the rocky slopes of the Channel Islands particularly Prince I. off San Miguel I. Breeding also occurs on the other northern Channel Islands and Santa Barbara I. Birds are often seen well at sea far from the breeding colonies. Wintering numbers irregularly fluctuate and vary with the number of birds arriving from the north. Migrants are occasionally seen from shore on good flight days.


**Rhinoceros Auklet Cerorhinca monocerata** – A common wintering bird in the northern waters of the Southern California Bight (Oct-May). Breeding grounds are mainly to the north of here but extend as far south as the rocks off San Miguel I. (McChesney et al. 1995) They are regularly seen on winter pelagic trips and can be seen from coastal promontories during major spring and fall flights with strong winds.

**Tufted Puffin Fratercula cirrhata** – Rare and irregular; (Jan-Jun). Breeding is known to have occurred historically on a number of the Channel Islands. The only currently known location is Prince I. and Castle Rock near San Miguel I. (McChesney et al. 1995) Recent records include single immature birds in May and June in 2002 and 2005, respectively, near Anacapa I. During the puffin invasion year of 1975 51 birds counted north of San Nicolas I. VEN 7-30 May which stands as the high count for the region. (Garrett & Dunn, 1981).

**Horned Puffin Fratercula corniculata** – An irregular and very rare vagrant in winter to late spring (Jan-Jun). Horned Puffins breed to the north of California. Invasion years have occurred in 1975 and 1976 which brought tens to hundreds of birds to the offshore waters and around the northern Channel Islands. Most records have been from May and June. (Garrett & Dunn, 1981) There have been no recent records of Horned Puffin for southern California.

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