

OFFSHORE RECORDS OF LAND BIRDS

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Birds encounter many hazards during their seasonal, long-distance migrations. Land birds migrating along the Atlantic seaboard, however, encounter the additional hazards of being blown out to sea during storms or of wandering far offshore, well out of the sight of land. The occasional occurrence of land birds offshore is not an unusual phenomenon, but most of the records are brief notes of chance observations often by passengers on ocean liners (Butler, 1926; Furlong, 1933). And there is at least one record made by an observant serviceman in World War II aboard a troopship in the North Atlantic (Riney, 1946). The exception to the brief notes are the records made by Scholander (1955) who listed 72 species of land birds observed from oceanographic research vessels operating in the Northwest Atlantic Ocean from 44° N. to the West Indies and from the east coast of North America to 51° W. The observations were made at irregular times by ship's personnel during the years 1933, 1934, 1936-1941, and 1949.

We had the opportunity to observe land birds at sea during a cooperative U.S.-Soviet fishery-oceanographic research cruise in October 1967 (Jensen and Poole, 1968). The cruise covered the Middle Atlantic Bight from Cape Cod to Cape Hatteras and from within 10 miles of the coast out to the edge of the Continental Shelf. During the cruise, large numbers of land birds landed on the ship, apparently to rest. Because of their fatigued state, we were able to pick up and hold most of the birds and thus positively identify them. A few birds that perched on the rigging were identified by sight. The identifications were verified by two other biologists in the scientific party.

This paper reports 29 species of land birds observed aboard the U.S. research vessel *Albatross IV* and the Soviet research vessel *Albatros*. It includes a number of species not reported by Scholander (1955) and relates the birds to nearby landmarks. We also discuss the mortality factors involved when land birds are lost over the open ocean.

Results

During the period October 4 to 27, 1967, a total of 29 species of land birds landed on, or were observed flying around the two research vessels (Table 1). The land birds came aboard most often when the ships were stopped (or moving slowly—ca. 4 knots) on a sampling station and thus there is a precise position for those observations. A few birds came aboard when the ships were proceeding at 10 to 12 knots between stations. These latter observations were “keyed” to the nearest station.

Table I
Land Birds Observed at Sea, 1967

Species	Approximate Distance From Shore (nautical miles)	Date	Number of Individuals
Osprey	40 miles ESE Montauk Point, N.Y.	9 Oct.	1
Duck Hawk (Peregrine Falcon)	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1
Pigeon Hawk	21 miles S Nantucket Island, Mass.	4 Oct.	1
Sora	40 miles ESE Montauk Point, N.Y.	9 Oct.	1
Mourning Dove	23 miles S Block Island, R.I.	5 Oct.	1
Yellow-Shafted Flicker	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1
Eastern Wood Pewee	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1
Blue Jay	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1
Winter Wren	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1
Catbird	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1
Brown Thrasher	23 miles S Block Island, R.I.	5 Oct.	1
Golden-crowned Kinglet	25 miles S Montauk Point, N.Y., 112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y., and 60 miles E Cape Henry, Va.	27 Oct. 20 Oct. 22 Oct.	2 3 10-15 (1 dead)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	40 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	7 Oct. 20 Oct.	3 5
Cedar Waxwing	23 miles S Block Island, R.I.	5 Oct.	2
Warbling Vireo	23 miles S Block Island, R.I.	5 Oct.	1
Black-and-white Warbler	23 miles S Block Island, R.I.	5 Oct.	1
Orange-crowned Warbler	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1 (dead)
Myrtle Warbler	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 71 miles SSE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	6 Oct. 18 Oct. 20 Oct.	3 10-15 (1 dead) 3

Table I (Continued)

Species	Approximate Distance From Shore (nautical miles)	Date	Number of Individuals
House Sparrow	60 miles E Cape Henry, Va.	22 Oct.	1
Eastern Meadowlark	30 miles E Oregon Inlet, N.C.	23 Oct.	1
Rusty Blackbird	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1
Brown-headed Cowbird	60 miles E Cape Henry, Va.	22 Oct.	1
Purple Finch	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y.	6 Oct.	1
Rufous-sided Towhee	30 miles E Oregon Inlet, N.C.	23 Oct.	1
Vesper Sparrow	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1
Slate-colored Junco	20 miles S Block Island, R.I., and 60 miles E Cape Henry, Va.	5 Oct. 22 Oct.	3 4
White-throated Sparrow	30 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 60 miles E Cape Henry, Va.	6 Oct. 22 Oct.	1 3
Song Sparrow	112 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.	20 Oct.	1

The most common birds, both in numbers and frequency of occurrence, were the myrtle warblers and the two species of kinglets. These little birds darted everywhere over the ship, often landing within a few feet of fishermen or members of the scientific party. They paid no attention to the people on deck but investigated the lines and poked around the nets to pick out what may have been tiny fragments of fish. Occasionally a warbler or kinglet would pause to dip its bill into one of the puddles of sea water that had collected in crevices here and there on the deck. It is not known how much—if any—sea water land birds can drink and tolerate.

A few dead birds were found on the decks of the vessels. These birds may have died after colliding with part of the superstructure or rigging or they may simply have died from exhaustion. Collision with the vessel, especially at night, is a distinct probability. It is normal for oceanographic ships to operate 24 hours a day and they are brightly lit during periods of darkness. Thus, the array of bright lights on an otherwise lightless ocean could easily attract and confuse birds and cause them to strike a mast or a line in the maze of rigging. Some birds blundered into lighted laboratory rooms and into passageways.

We saw a daylight collision when an osprey (the only one observed on the cruise) struck a guy wire in the rigging. At 1730 on 9 October, the osprey was seen circling the Soviet vessel and attempting to land on the rigging. The bird had difficulty avoiding the guy wires and finally struck one. It fluttered down to the deck over the forepeak and was easily approached by one of the Soviet fishermen. The bird must have been in an extremely fatigued or perhaps dazed condition because it offered no resistance when the fisherman fastened a length of line to one of its feet and then placed a large wire basket over the bird to cage it. The vessel was due in port the next day and plans were made to release the osprey ashore. It did not appear to be injured and on 10 October it was taken to Salt Pond Bird Sanctuary in the seaside village of Falmouth (Mass.) and released.

We also had a good opportunity to observe a male duck hawk that remained with the *Albatros* for nearly 2 days. This distinctive falcon arrived the evening of October 6 and took up a perch high in the rigging. It made a number of short sorties out from the ship but always returned in one or two minutes. On one of the sorties we saw the falcon take after a small warbler that was approaching the ship. The falcon knocked it into the water, retrieved it, rose well above the ship, faced upwind, and then on almost motionless wings proceeded to eat its prey before returning to perch on the ship. One can only surmise from observing the duck hawk that some land birds do have a chance to survive over the open ocean if they find opportunities to rest occasionally on ships and to obtain food.

Discussion

Scholander's (1955) review of the bird records at her disposal led her to note that the presence of land birds at sea is most striking during October. We have no previous data to compare our present records with, but must agree with her statement. She further noted that more land birds were seen at sea during the autumn than during the spring, suggesting that the seaward route was more popular in the autumn. Northwesterly winds during the latter part of the year offer the advantage of acting as a tail wind to help the birds fly eastward toward the coast and thence southward to their overwintering areas. There is considerable risk, however, in that the birds may overshoot the land during the dark or in periods of fog or precipitation. In addition, autumnal storms with strong winds from the northwest can easily blow the birds out over the open ocean. The number of fatigued or dead birds we saw suggest they are in a state of exhaustion and probably are disoriented once they leave the landmasses and are over the trackless expanse of the open sea.

The few birds we recorded aboard the vessels during the cruise reported here lead us to speculate about the unseen thousands of birds that must have been over the ocean but did not encounter any vessels on which to rest. The majority of them, especially the small, weak flyers, must certainly have perished in the sea. Such losses must indeed represent a sizeable — if unmeasurable—factor of avian mortality.

In addition to the land birds noted here, a variety of oceanic birds of the kinds usually encountered by vessels offshore were observed (Table II). The gannet was an immature individual and landed on the Soviet

Table II
Oceanic birds Observed from U.S. and Soviet Research Vessels, 1967

Species	Approximate Distance From Shore (nautical miles)
Greater Shearwater	31 miles SSE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 90 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.
Wilson's Petrel	40 miles ESE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 60 miles SSE Montauk Point, N.Y.
Gannet	40 miles ESE Montauk Point, N.Y. (imm.) Adults common offshore of Long Island
Parasitic Jaeger	41 miles SE Montauk Point, N.Y., 72 miles SSE Montauk Point, N.Y., and 90 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.
Great Black-backed Gull	Common throughout offshore N.Y. waters
Herring Gull	Common throughout offshore N.Y. waters
Ring-Billed Gull	31 miles SSE Montauk Point, N.Y.
Laughing Gull	72 miles S Montauk Point, N.Y.
Black-legged Kittiwake	72 miles S Montauk Point, N.Y., and 90 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.
Common Tern	90 miles S Fire Island Inlet, N.Y.

research vessel. After it had rested, it flew off again. A Wilson's petrel apparently became confused some time during the night of October 8, and flew into the laboratory on the deck of the Soviet vessel. It was allowed to remain there to rest and in the morning was released. None of the parasitic jaegers was seen to attack any of the other birds—land or oceanic forms—despite the fatigued and confused condition of the land birds.

Summary

During a cooperative U.S.-Soviet fishery-oceanographic survey of the Middle Atlantic Bight in 1967, 29 species of land birds were observed on and around the U.S. research vessel *Albatross IV* and the Soviet research vessel *Albatros*. The birds appeared exhausted and disoriented. Some dead birds were found on the decks. These observations, and those of other authors, suggest that bird mortality may be great during migration over the open ocean or when the birds are blown out to sea during storms.

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