

FRIGATEBIRD IN ROCKLAND COUNTY

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The first few days of April 1982 produced two of the most violent non-hurricane storms of the century. From the afternoon of 2 April through 4 April, a powerful front extending from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico passed eastward, with winds in excess of 75 mph, and on 6 April the East endured a genuine blizzard, with winds up to 60 mph. This storm, on its way northeastward, skirted the Gulf of Mexico and was centered off Georgia and South Carolina when it became a matter of concern to New York area weather forecasters.

At midday on 7 April, the sky had totally cleared in Rockland County, but a northwest wind was still gusting from calm to 50-55 mph. A few hundred feet south of the state line at Northvale, New Jersey, Lee Bjong glanced out his window while on the telephone with a business associate and saw what looked like "a large black plastic bag" plunging from the sky. He excused himself and stepped outside. As an experienced sailboater, he immediately realized that the wind had produced "a horrendous downdraft," and he recognized the object as a big black bird, wings half folded and struggling to keep from somersaulting. At about 35 or 40 feet above the ground and 100 feet away from Mr. Bjong, the bird righted itself, straightened out, and planed upward to 50 feet or so, headed northwestward into the wind. Mr. Bjong watched until the bird disappeared behind trees that blocked his view, by that time well on the New York side of the state line, in Rockland County.

Mr. Bjong had the distinct feeling that he recognized the bird, and he associated it with his extensive time in the Caribbean and the Florida Keys. But before he checked any of his bird books, he decided to exercise his profession as a commercial artist by putting his impressions on paper as quickly as possible. At his drawing board he made a silhouette sketch which, after further recall of his observations, he then refined in a second sketch that brought out more clearly the sweepback of the long, narrow wings and also the "V" of the inner portions of the wings. He noted that the wings spanned six or seven feet and that the tail was long and pointed, briefly appearing forked at times during the bird's gyrations. He then took out his new Peterson guide and looked up the Magnificent Frigatebird. His second sketch was almost identical to that of the adult male in Peterson, even to the direction of flight.

Because of the bird's great wingspan, Mr. Bjong notes that his first impression was of an albatross, also having seen these at sea. In fact, he returned to the telephone excitedly to tell his caller, "I think I've just seen an albatross," which led to jokes about "Ancient Mariners." But he says he quickly realized that his wind-tossed bird was too slender, too crooked-winged, too black-bodied, and too pointy-tailed to be an albatross. To be on the safe side, he also looked up the albatrosses and also the Swallow-tailed Kite (much too small and white). He recalls that he has seen frigatebirds even closer than on this occasion, as close as 25 feet over a boat when the frigatebird was harassing a smaller bird that had caught a fish.

I can think of no other bird more positively identifiable by the casual observer, with or without binoculars or a field guide. I see no reason to doubt that a windblown frigatebird did appear, barely within both New York and New Jersey, on 7 April 1982.

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[While the bird reported here was almost certainly a Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*), the Lesser Frigatebird (*F. ariel*) has occurred in North America as an accidental; it is therefore not possible to identify this bird to species.—Eds.]