

# YELLOW-NOSED ALBATROSS ON FIRE ISLAND, LI, NY

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## ABSTRACT

In May 2000 an adult Yellow-nosed Albatross came ashore on Fire Island, Long Island, Suffolk Co. That same day another was seen in the Elizabeth Islands in MA, and then over a five week period between 9 May and 18 Jun, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses were found in NJ, RI, and MA. Details of each occurrence are provided, as well as a complete history of all previous credible albatross reports from NYS, including several overlooked in previous papers chronicling Southern Hemisphere albatrosses in North America.

## THE SPRING 2000 ALBATROSS 'EVENT'

At 1730h on 9 May 2000, several Virginia Tech University scientists and students preparing a vegetative cover map for Fire Island National Seashore were driving along the oceanfront beach at Robbin's Rest, Suffolk Co., about 7 km (4 mi) east of Fire Island Lighthouse when they came upon an enormous bird standing on the beach among some summering Herring (*Larus argentatus*) and Great Black-backed (*L. marinus*) gulls. Not quite believing their eyes, they recognized that it was an albatross. Aware that this was a truly unusual occurrence and with great presence of mind, they immediately took several images with their digital camera (Figs. 1-2). In addition to the photos, they made the following notes:

'Attention was immediately drawn by its great size, approximately twice that of the gulls it was with. The gulls appeared undisturbed and displayed neither aggression toward nor fear of the albatross when it walked among them or took off and flew, relanding with

them. The albatross was easily studied through binoculars while on the ground and in flight, at times as close as 7-8 m (25 ft).

'We noted its black bill with yellow ridge, a unique 'dip' in the bill between the head and tip; white underwing with a narrow black fringe (in flight); black upperwing; white body; light grayish head; long narrow wings we estimated to be about 2 m (7 ft) across, short, dark tail (in relation to the wings and body) and of course its enormous size, as it towered over the Great Black-backs, the largest gulls in North America.

'In flight it repeatedly made laps over the same section of beach, during which one of its wingtips often touched the sand in mid-turn. After multiple passes, it would return to the beach where it would mill around among the gulls. While on the ground, it walked about actively, all the while seeming keenly observant of its surroundings, constantly scanning the beach in all directions. All told, we watched it for about 15 minutes, and when we left the area at 1735h, it was still on the beach among the gulls.'

The plumage details and photos prove it was an albatross, and that it could only have been a Yellow-nosed (*Thallasarche chlororhynchos*). The yellow culmen (=culminicorn) confirmed its age, and the description and photos showing the bill and underwing eliminated the other two possible candidates—Gray-headed (*T. chrysostoma*) and Buller's (*T. bulleri*). Apart from the fact that neither has ever occurred in the North Atlantic (and Buller's not even in the South Atlantic), this bird's bill was too small and slender for Buller's, and lacked the yellow/orange ramicorn (=a horny plate on the side of the lower mandible), while its very light gray head, largely white underwing narrowly edged with black, and absence of yellow on the ramicorn were all incorrect for Buller's.

Amazingly, at 1145h the same day the Fire Island bird showed up, an adult Yellow-nosed Albatross appeared over land in a Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) colony on Penikese Island, in the Elizabeth Islands, Buzzards Bay, Dukes Co., MA (B. Blodget *et al.*). Penikese Island is about 215 km (135 mi) almost directly northeast of Robbin's Rest. If the Penikese albatross left immediately after its 1145h observation, it could easily have reached Robbin's Rest just before its 1730h Fire Island discovery by maintaining an average speed of only 32 km/hr (20 mi/hr), not excessive for an albatross on the move. But did it? We are unaware of any photos of the Penikese bird which could be matched with those from Fire Island, so we cannot say.

Twelve days later, Sunday 21 May, an adult albatross believed to be, but not certainly identified as, a Yellow-nosed, flew over Shawneen Finnegan's car while she was driving along the Garden State Parkway southern end in Cape May, NJ. This was a most unsatisfactory first NJ record, and the next day scores of observers scoured Cape May Co. shores, but to no avail. Then, on Tuesday 23



Fig. 1 Yellow-nosed Albatross 9 May 2000 Note wingspan Fire Island, LI, NY

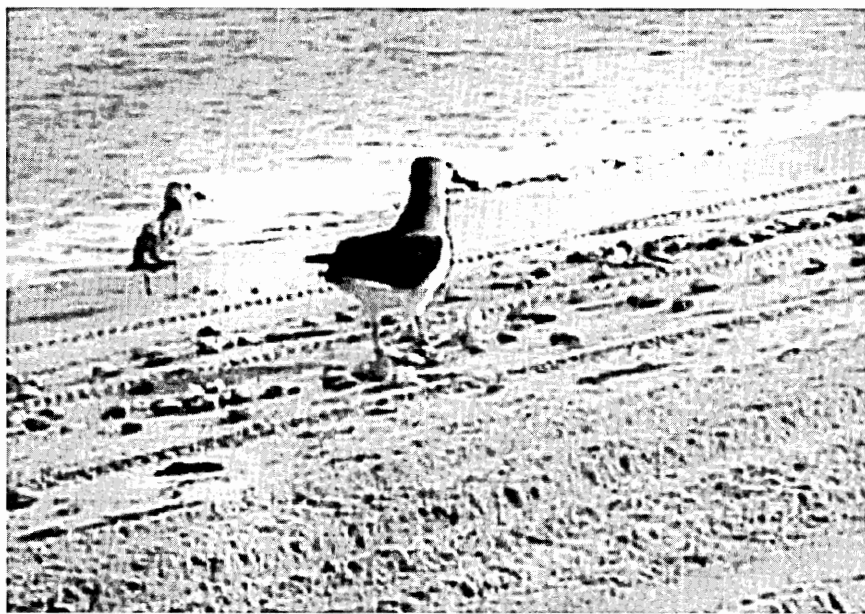


Fig. 2 Yellow-nosed Albatross 9 May 2000 Note size comparison to gull  
Fire Island, LI, NY Digital Photos courtesy of Scott Klopfer

May, what was doubtless the same individual was relocated some 15 km (9.5 mi) northwest of Finnegan's encounter, along the shore of Delaware Bay at Reed's Beach. It spent the better part of the day flying over the beach, and walking around on mudflats in among gulls, at times flying to within 3-4 m (10-15 ft) of astonished observers. By the next morning it had vanished again. This time, its identification as a Yellow-nosed Albatross was firmly established.

At 1500h on Saturday 27 May, Larry Moniz and several amazed nonbirders watched an albatross almost sail over their heads, again on land, at Manasquan Inlet, Ocean Co., northern NJ. They all described its wingspan as 'about seven feet,' but no detailed description has yet been received. Curiously, NJ's first accepted Black-browed Albatross (*T. melanophris*) was also found at Manasquan Inlet, and under similar conditions, on 24 Oct 1989.

Another eight days later, on Sunday 4 Jun, at 1430h, a Yellow-nosed Albatross (whose culmen could not be seen with certainty and thus it could not be aged) appeared again over land, being pursued by crows, at Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge, Washington Co., along RI's south coast. Scott Tsagarakis's careful description of its underwing pattern confirmed the identification as Yellow-nosed.

At 1100h the very next day, Monday 5 Jun, an unequivocal adult albatross again firmly identified as a Yellow-nosed was also seen over land, this time by Daniel Sutherland at Tom Nevers Head, on the extreme southeastern corner of Nantucket Island, MA, some 145 km (90 mi) from Trustom Pond.

Thirteen days after that, on Sunday 18 Jun, at 1530h, an unaged albatross not identified to species but described as '50% larger than accompanying Greater Shearwaters (*Puffinus gravis*)' was reported by Charles Witek as it cruised past his chumming fishing boat in the Atlantic Ocean 29 km (18 mi) southeast of Fire Island Inlet—almost within sight of where the May Fire Island bird had come ashore. As of this writing (30 Jun) there have been no further plausible reports of albatrosses anywhere in the northeast. (It should be noted that no state records committees have yet considered any of the above reports.)

The big question of course is how many different albatrosses might have been involved in the multiple occurrences described above (fortunately all seen by experienced birders), over a period of five weeks along a coastline almost 650 km (400 mi) long. Could only one bird have been ranging over such a vast area, or did a small group invade the Northeast? Absent unequivocally simultaneous observations in two locations, or more than one bird together, or identifiably different individuals in photos, the question remains unanswerable.

## PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED NEW YORK STATE ALBATROSS REPORTS

- adult Yellow-nosed, sitting on the water 3 km (2 mi) south of Jones Beach State Park, Nassau Co., 29 May 1960 (Bull 1961);
- adult Yellow-nosed, sitting on beach, Gardiner's Island, Suffolk Co., 8 Jun 1971 (R. Hernandez; Davis and Morgan 1971);
- unaged albatross not identified to species, flying across the Belt Parkway at the Narrows, Brooklyn, NY, 21 May 1973 (E.J. Daly; Buckley and Davis 1973);
- adult Yellow-nosed, Croton Pt., Hudson River, Westchester Co., 10 Aug 1976, the morning after passage of Tropical Storm *Belle* the previous night (B. Weismann and W. Howe; Paxton *et al.* 1977);
- unaged Yellow-nosed, flying over land, Crown Pt. Peninsula, Lake Champlain, Essex Co., 8 May 1994 (J.M. Peterson and D. Spaulding; Peterson 1994).

Most astonishing at the time was the Brooklyn over land report. Still, Daly, well known personally to PAB and T.H. Davis, had described and sketched his albatross in meticulous detail at the time of its observation. He was also questioned at length by PAB and Davis, neither of whom had any doubt he had seen an albatross of some species. At the time, many summarily dismissed the notion of an albatross over land in the Northeast as patently absurd, even some who knew and respected the observer. Yet in the intervening years, both Black-browed (in MA and in NJ) and Yellow-nosed (in ME, MA, NY, NJ, FL, LA, and TX at least) have been recorded over or nearly over land, and in spring 2000 alone, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses were seen over/on land in MA (twice), RI, NY, and NJ (twice). We now know that Yellow-nosed is the more likely May-June species, although this information obviously cannot *ex post facto* identify the Brooklyn bird to species.

The Gardiner's Island bird was described in detail to PAB and Dennis Puleston, neither of whom had any doubt as to the correctness of the identification and ageing. The Lake Champlain bird was unequivocally identified as a Yellow-nosed Albatross at the time of observation, and even though NYSARC accepted it only as 'albatross sp.,' Peterson (pers. comm.) had no doubts then or now that it was a Yellow-nosed. The Gardiner's Island and Brooklyn reports were probably never submitted to NYSARC.

In addition, at least two different Yellow-nosed Albatrosses have been found at Cox's Ledge, a submarine plateau and fishing ground ca. 65 km (40 mi) east-southeast of Montauk Point, LI, NY, and partly in MA and partly in RI waters:

- 'subadult,' 21 Aug 1976, only 11 days after Tropical Storm *Belle* dropped the adult noted above on the Hudson River (C. Wood, A. Jarmin; Paxton *et al.* 1977; Conway 1992);
- 'immature,' 21 Aug 1979, photographed by T.H. Davis (Vickery 1980).

Overlooked by almost all previous North American albatross chroniclers was an albatross primary feather picked up at Jones Beach, Nassau Co., LI, NY on 7 Nov 1948 by D.G. Nichols, who had been attracted by its strong, oily smell. The feather gave no indication of having been in the water, a conclusion reinforced by retention of its characteristic tubenose odor. It was examined by R.C. Murphy, who stated that 'I doubt whether the quill is positively identifiable to species [but] it most closely resembles *Diomedea chlororhynchos*...appears to have been not long molted...and was in all probability a naturally molted feather' (Nichols 1950). Its condition and its location high on the beach suggest that it might even have been dropped at that spot by a preening albatross that had come ashore. Even if not, it is a more than reasonable supposition that its owner lost it not far away, somewhere within NYS.

An adult Black-browed Albatross reported seen from shore at Tobay Beach, Jones Beach, Nassau Co., LI, 27 May 1996 was voted 'not accepted' by NYSARC (NYSARC 1999). We are aware of the following credible Black-browed Albatross reports elsewhere in the northeastern US: one in VA (Patteson *et al.* 1999), one in NJ (Walsh *et al.* 1999), and 4-6 (perhaps involving 5-7 individuals) in MA (Veit and Petersen 1993; Ellison and Martin 1997), so its occurrence in NYS would not be unexpected.

Both Yellow-nosed and Black-browed albatrosses were reported on several occasions in the early 1970s from the New York Bight, especially at or near Hudson Canyon. This occurred before the USA 200 nm (370 km) territorial limit was declared, and when many factory-ship fishing fleets were working continental shelf-break and submarine canyon waters in the New York Bight and attracting unprecedented seabird numbers. Nonetheless, all efforts to obtain written descriptions and other supporting details for every single one of these albatross reports have failed. As a result, none should be accepted without reservation until this situation changes.

Yellow-nosed Albatross has now established a genuine pattern of appearance in the NJ-NY-RI-MA area, with most records in May-June, plus a handful in August (at least two were probably hurricane related, as were several others from northern New England and the Canadian Maritime Provinces). It is presumed that all North Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses belong to the nominate form, *chlororhynchos*, which breeds in islands in the South Atlantic (A.O.U. 1998). Adults' (often pale) grey heads, usually much lighter than Gray-headed or Buller's, differ strikingly from the white heads of *bassi*, the southern Indian Ocean breeding form. Nonetheless, while none of the half-dozen Yellow-nosed Albatross specimens from North America has ever been subspecifically identified, most adults seen or photographed here have had gray heads to varying degrees, which should eliminate *bassi* from consideration. Petersen (1999) published photos (p. 445) of a particularly dark-headed individual in the Gulf of Maine on 6 July 1999.

Assessments of Yellow-nosed Albatross reports in NY and the Northeast were done by Post (1968), for USA East Coast Black-broweds by DuMont (1973), for Yellow-nosed and Black-browed in the western North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico by McDaniel (1973), and for all Southern Hemisphere albatrosses in North America by Mlodinow (1999). All are excellent sources of information.

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