

Adventures in Field Identification: An Unusual Manx Shearwater at Jones Inlet, Nassau County, NY, 17-26 Sep 2005

S. S. Mitra

Biology Department, College Staten Island,
2800 Victory Blvd., Staten Island, NY 10314
mitra@mail.csi.cuny.edu

On 17 September 2005, Patricia Lindsay discovered a small black-and-white shearwater in Jones Inlet, Nassau County, NY. This bird was intensively studied by many observers over a period of more than a week and presented an exceptional identification challenge. I studied the bird under a variety of conditions on five dates and was involved in the identification (and misidentification!) process from its initial discovery and tentative identification as a Manx Shearwater, to publicly questioning its identity, to its tentative re-identification as an Audubon's Shearwater, to its ultimate identification as a probable Manx after all. The present note includes accounts of this complex and entertaining process and the field data and photographs that support the final (!) identification.

On 17 September, a number of birders were gathered near the boat basin at Jones Beach West End. I was studying shorebirds on the bar to the east of the Coast Guard Station when Patricia discovered a distant bird resting on the water of Jones Inlet, perhaps 600 meters to the north. Just as the rest of us were finding the bird in our scopes, it arose and flew several hundred meters to the north and west. My very first impression during this flight was that the bird was likely an Audubon's Shearwater, and I urged my companions during these first seconds to study its flight action and to try to discern the color of its undertail coverts. To my eye, this very first long flight, like the dozens I subsequently saw over the next few days, was atypical of Manx Shearwater in the following ways: flapping series were very rapid and prolonged; glides were few, brief, and lacked arcing on angled wings; and the overall flight path was direct, without veering. In short, its flight could be described, in contrast to that of Manx Shearwater, as alcid-like. I said this during that first flight, but even before this flight was concluded, I recognized that the undertail coverts were largely white. This latter impression was amply confirmed through study of the bird swimming and in flight, both from our original vantage east of the boat basin, and from a somewhat closer vantage about one km to the west. In weighing the evidence with my companions, I concluded that the white undertail coverts indicated that the bird was a Manx Shearwater. I accounted for my reservations concerning its flight style by invoking the glassy, windless conditions and unusual inshore setting.

Even so, I was not completely comfortable with the identification. On the basis of date, location, and recent weather (Hurricane Ophelia had passed offshore the day before), Audubon's seemed more probable than Manx. Furthermore, my original field notes from that day contained the following statement: "flight views continued to impress me with a longish, wedge-shaped

tail and a substantial dark band beyond (distal to) the white undertail coverts.” Both of these features were noted independently by Patricia. She also agreed with my description of the flight action. Significantly, she noted another important feature that day that I neglected: she explicitly remembered seeing dark margins around the underwing and pointed to this feature in photos of Audubon’s later that evening. In short, several features suggestive of Audubon’s Shearwater were difficult to ignore.

The bird was not reported on Sunday, but Patricia found it again the following morning (Monday 19 Sep) and verified several of these puzzling features: alcid-like flight action, long and wedge-shaped tail, dark margins around the underwing, group-feeding behavior with other seabirds, etc. She was the only person who saw the bird that day. When I posted a summary of our weekend birds to the NYSBirds listserv that day, I referred to the bird as a Manx Shearwater, but took pains to explain that the identification was based mainly on the white undertail coverts and that I had reservations concerning the flight style. Dick Veit responded immediately, informing me that a significant proportion of Audubon’s Shearwaters show extensively white undertail coverts. This piece of information cast the balance of field observations in a different perspective, and I began to suspect that the bird was probably an Audubon’s Shearwater after all. I drafted a new message to NYSBirds, expressing my doubts about the original ID, stating in more detail some of the characters suggestive of Audubon’s, and asking that observers familiar with both species attempt to study it the following morning.

Armed with new identification information and specific goals of noting the underwing pattern and nailing down structure and flight style characters, Patricia and I returned on Tuesday morning. For the third time, Pat located the bird, and we satisfied ourselves that its size (distinctly smaller than adjacent Laughing Gulls), shape, flight style, and underwing pattern all supported identification as Audubon’s and were counter-indicative of Manx. All views through this time were at long range, at least a third of a mile or more. Its face pattern remained very difficult to describe in any detail, as did its bill structure, although we recorded impressions of both of these features that favored Manx. Given the distance of our views and the subtle nature of these characters, we placed less emphasis on them. Similarly, we regarded the apparently blackish dorsal color tone and whitish undertail coverts as less informative than the readily discernible flight action and overall body size.

On Wednesday morning, Patricia once again relocated the shearwater in the inlet. This time we were joined by a number of new observers. All of the field marks were studied and discussed at length, and we agreed that the bulk of the evidence favored Audubon’s. Even the upperparts now appeared to be brownish in the brighter light. Some reservations about the bill length and face pattern persisted, but it was difficult to give these much credence given the long-range views. The bird was seen again on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday by many observers, virtually all of whom supported the identification as Audubon’s.

On Sunday 25 September, Matt Bayer and Tom Burke attempted to view the bird from the north side of the inlet. They met a boat owner there who agreed to help them approach the bird. In this manner they obtained much closer views than had previously been possible, and also some photographs of limited quality. These

observations yielded two new insights that raised fresh concerns about the identification: first, the bird's bill and face pattern really appeared to match Manx much better than Audubon's; and second, the plumage was determined to be heavily worn and damaged, perhaps explaining aspects of the flight style. Also on Sunday, John Askildsen studied the bird at length from the south side of the inlet and concluded that it was a Manx.

Finally, on Monday 26 Sep, I waded out into the north side of the inlet and managed to obtain some useful photographs (Figs. 1-4). On the basis of these photographs and the observations from the previous day, it became clear that the bird was very long-billed and dark-lored, and that it showed dark auriculars bounded to the rear by a thin curling wedge of white-features indicative of Manx Shearwater. In retrospect, the odd flight action of this individual was likely a consequence of its extremely poor plumage condition—a feature that simply could not be discerned during long-range views.

To change one's opinion of a bird's identity, not once but several times over the course of ten days, is a humbling and disconcerting process, but in struggling between Audubon's and Manx, the observers of the Jones Inlet shearwater joined a very large and venerable club. The statuses of these two species in our area have puzzled ornithologists, including the likes of Giraud, Eaton and Bull, for more than a century and a half, and debates over the relative utility of various field marks are still routine today. For instance, we learned that even very distinctive impressions of flight style can be misleading; that Audubon's Shearwaters show more variation in color of the undertail coverts than is widely appreciated; and that dorsal color (black vs. brown) probably varies more with lighting, and with plumage state and wear, than it does between these two species.

This experience clearly illustrates some of the challenges and pitfalls of bird identification, and it reminds us that when one is confronted with a set of conflicting characters, it can be extremely difficult to deduce the correct interpretation. Here we were fortunate to have the bird remain for 10 days, allowing observation by many birders under a variety of conditions. Ultimately, some of the age-old rules of field identification were reinforced: get the best, longest, and closest looks possible (without endangering the bird's or one's own welfare, of course); consider but don't be unduly influenced by the conclusions and comments of other observers; and perhaps most importantly, enjoy the learning curve!



Figure 1. Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*),
with Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*),
Jones Inlet, Nassau Co., NY. 26 September 2005.
© S. S. Mitra.



Figure 2. Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*),
with Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*),
Jones Inlet, Nassau Co., NY. 26 September 2005.
© S. S. Mitra.



Figure 3. Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*),
Jones Inlet, Nassau Co., NY. 26 September 2005.
© S. S. Mitra.



Figure 4. Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*),
Jones Inlet, Nassau Co., NY. 26 September 2005.
© S. S. Mitra.