

Unusual Birds from an Unusual Storm

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This is a report of nearly all the unusual regional bird sightings related to the storm known as Hurricane Sandy that came ashore on October 29, 2012 in New Jersey, continued west across Pennsylvania, and then north into Canada. It was a large and forceful storm and it had a big effect on people, the physical environment, to birders, and it had an obvious effect on birds.

Hurricane Sandy was an unusual storm. It came north, out over the Atlantic Ocean, along the eastern coast of the United States, and instead of going east, out to sea, as most storms do, with the west to east flow of the Jet Stream, it instead went west, as it was blocked by another weather system, and thus came inland.

Sandy was a big storm. The highest storm surge was 14.6 feet at Bergen Point, New Jersey. The estimated property loss is about \$20 billion, making it among the most expensive of U.S. disasters. The top wind gusts on land were 90 miles per hour at Islip, New York and Robbins Reef, New Jersey. Over 8.5 million homes lost power and 20,000 airline flights were cancelled. Easton, Maryland had the most rainfall at 12.55 inches and Gatlinburg, Tennessee had the most snow at 34 inches from the storm. The evacuation zone included communities along 400 miles of coastline from Ocean City, Maryland to Dartmouth, Massachusetts.

A juvenile Red-billed Tropicbird was found, exhausted, on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River on October 30. It was taken from the Carney's Point area, to a rehab center in southern New Jersey, where the bird did well, before being taken to the Tri-State Bird Rescue center in Delaware. Actually where the bird came ashore, the land is New Jersey, but the water is Delaware. So, the bird was taken back to a state where it must have been. It's said to be the second Red-billed Tropicbird that's been in New Jersey. I remember apparently the first, also a juvenile, years ago in May 1983, which was taken to a bird rehab center on Long Beach Island.



Photo courtesy of Cedar Run Refuge

Immature Red-billed Tropicbird found in New Jersey on October 30, 2012.

A Trindade Petrel, a pterodroma of the Atlantic Ocean, nesting well off the coast of Brazil, apparently was brought with the storm into Pennsylvania. One was found in Holidaysburg, south of Altoona, in Blair County, after the storm. It was found by a mailbox, and not near water. When such a petrel gets grounded, it cannot lift up into flight. The bird was not well. It was weak, and taken to a bird rehab center in State College, PA, where it was measured and weighed. Subsequently it died, and will become a specimen in a museum. Years ago, in the 1960s, an all-dark petrel was seen in flight at a hawk watch along the Kittatinny Ridge in Pennsylvania. It was said to be, oddly, a Kermadec Petrel, but it may have been a dark-morph Trindade Petrel. The Trindade Petrel is a bird of the Atlantic Ocean, while the Herald Petrel, with which it has been conspecific, is a bird of the tropical Pacific. A Cory's Shearwater, very much alive, was along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, near Harrisburg, on October 30. It was observed hovering above the river for 10 to 15 minutes before it went north.

Further east in Pennsylvania, on October 30, these birds were seen along the lower Delaware River, in the area of Philadelphia: 20-plus Leach's Storm-Petrels,

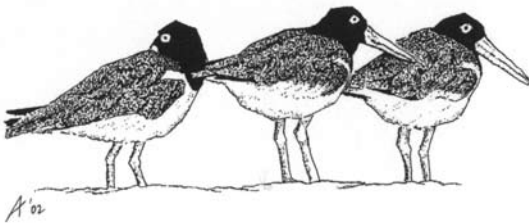
Unusual Birds from an Unusual Storm

a Pomarine Jaeger and a Parasitic Jaeger (a subadult floating down the river), an immature Sooty Tern, and an immature Sabine's Gull, along with 4 Royal Terns, nearly 120 Common Terns (with 1 flock of 80), 20 Forster's Terns, and 8 Bonaparte's Gulls. Also: over 230 Brant, and all 3 Scoter species, 16 Common Loons, 2 Red-throated Loons, a Horned Grebe, a Red Phalarope, and over 75 Dunlin.

Along the Delaware River, by the Commodore Barry Bridge, south of Philadelphia, early in the morning on October 30, among the 8 Leach's Storm-Petrels that were seen, 2 were observed, in an extended aerial bout, being caught by Peregrine Falcons that reside at the bridge. Nearby, later in the day, a Phalarope (probably a Red) was also seen being snatched by a Peregrine.

Observers were looking at birds along the lower Delaware River from both the Pennsylvania and the New Jersey sides of the river. The species just mentioned were seen from New Jersey as well as from Pennsylvania. Also quite unusual, seen from the New Jersey side along that stretch of the Delaware River, were 2 American Oystercatchers. Another Leach's Storm Petrel along the river was seen being pursued and caught by a Northern Harrier.

On October 31, on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, a Leach's Storm-Petrel was seen flying along the river near the Philadelphia Airport. Also, two large flocks of Red Phalaropes were seen there, totaling around 50 birds. Both Black and Surf Scoters were present. And a Parasitic Jaeger was seen chasing a Ring-billed Gull. Downriver, at Marcus Hook, again, as there were the previous day along that stretch of the river (but on the New Jersey side), 2 American Oystercatchers were present.



American Oystercatcher
© Adrian Binns

Some people along the lower Delaware River, on October 30, were at the right place at the right time to see large numbers of Pomarine Jaegers. One set of observers on the NJ side saw 2 flocks of Pomarines, one with 8 birds, and the other 11. The Jaegers flew downriver, put down on the water for a bit, and then continued flying on their way. Some had long tail streamers, while many did not.

Further south along the Delaware River, in the state of Delaware, where the river widens at Delaware City, some observers saw as many as 80 Pomarine Jaegers. There were over 50 in one flock. Another large flock of Pomarine Jaegers along the lower Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania will be noted in a moment.

South of Delaware City, Delaware, on October 30, from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., 68 Jaegers were tallied, mostly Pomarine, some thought to be Parasitic. There was a large group of 41 Jaegers at once. Also seen there were some Common Terns and Brant. Also near Delaware City, a Sandwich Tern was seen with a Laughing Gull.

Along the Delaware River on October 30, at New Castle, one observer saw a Leach's Storm-Petrel and another Storm-Petrel that appeared to be a Wilson's. It would have been late for a Wilson's, but the bird did not look or act like a Leach's. Other Wilson's Storm-Petrels were identified as such in Pennsylvania, as you will read below.

Further south in Delaware, along the coast of the Delaware Bay, from Delaware City to Cedar Swamp, birds seen included: a Cave Swallow, a Northern Gannet, a "dark-winged" Tern, and Pomarine Jaegers. More Pomarine Jaegers were reported at Fowler's Beach by the Delaware Bay. On October 31, in northern Delaware, away from the river, a Pomarine Jaeger was seen flying by the Ashland Hawk Watch, heading south.

Shifting now back to Pennsylvania, to the lower Susquehanna River, these birds were seen during the afternoon on October 30: a Northern Gannet near Harrisburg, flying north along the river, a Red Phalarope flying downriver, and then at least two flocks of Red Phalaropes containing 20 birds, and a Black-legged Kittiwake seen on the water and in flight with

Unusual Birds from an Unusual Storm

a Bonaparte's Gull before it lifted up into a low cloud and disappeared. More along that part of the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg included: 2 Parasitic Jaegers, both adults, and as many as 58 Pomarine Jaegers, including one flock of 47 birds sitting on the water; an immature Black Skimmer flew upriver; 3 American Oystercatcher flew upriver together; also, but flying downriver, almost 200 Red Knots, in several flocks; and 1 flock of Sanderlings, several flocks of other peeps, 2 Hudsonian Godwits, and at least 3 Cave Swallows. Tallies of other species included: about 550 Brant, 680 Pintails, 400 Scaup (both species), 1 Cattle Egret, about 700 Dunlin, 50 Laughing Gulls, over 50 Common Terns, 4,000 Tree Swallows, 1 Cliff Swallow; and yes, the Scoters again, all 3 species, numbering about 80. In the city of Harrisburg, a White-winged Dove was seen on October 31. More Swallows along the Susquehanna lately were seen between the Route 30 and Route 462 bridges: numerous Tree, a Barn or two, Rough-winged, and both Cliff and Cave. These were all after Sandy, on November 1.

Further south along the Susquehanna River, at the Conejohela Flats in Lancaster County, on October 31, after Sandy, an immature Black Skimmer was found, and 4 Red Phalaropes were seen. The Black Skimmer continued at the Conejohela Flats until at least November 4. Further south yet along the Susquehanna River, in Pennsylvania just north of Maryland, on October 30, during a 5-hour period, there were: almost 220 Brant, 9 Black Scoters, 23 Red Phalaropes (in two flocks of 12 and 11 flying downriver), and 8 Pomarine Jaegers that sometimes harassed gulls and terns.

In Carbon County, in northeastern Pennsylvania, at the Beltsville Reservoir, on October 30: a Red Phalarope, 2 late Red-necked Phalaropes, 3 Pomarine Jaegers, 1 probable Parasitic Jaeger, hundreds of Dunlin, a single Sanderling (an unusual bird there), 1 Ruddy Turnstone (an unusual bird there), over 100 Brant (unusual there), all 3 Scoter species, and a Cave Swallow. The following day (October 31), all of those birds were gone, except 1 Sanderling, 4 Black Scoters, and 1 Red-necked Grebe not seen the previous day.

In Bucks County, in eastern PA, at Peace Valley, there was a Red-necked Grebe on November 1 and 2, and a Surf Scoter on November 2. Back on October 30, 4 Leach's Storm-Petrels were seen, 1 at Lake Nocka-

mixon and 3 in Lower Bucks. American Oystercatchers were seen at both places, one at each. Amazingly, the one at Lake Nockamixon was the third record of one there since 2003! Two Red Phalaropes were at Lake Nockamixon, as were 2 White-winged Scoters and 2 Horned Grebes. Also, over 160 Brant, and 2 or 3 Cave Swallows. Two Pomarine Jaegers were in Lower Bucks, as were all 3 Scoter species, 2 or 3 Cave Swallows, and a late Chimney Swift and Barn Swallow. On October 31, at Lake Nockamixon, there was a Royal Tern and Cave Swallow.

Cave Swallows were also in Philadelphia on October 30 at the FDR Park and along the Delaware River. At the John Heinz Refuge, along the Philadelphia-Delaware County PA border, on October 31, there was a Cave Swallow, a Red Phalarope, and a Northern Shrike (the first of these in that area this season).

In Chester County, in southeastern PA, at Chambers Lake, on October 30, there were 20 Surf Scoters, with other ducks. In Berks County, in east-central PA, at Lake Ontelaunee, on October 30, there were 4 Red Phalaropes, and Black and Surf Scoters, seen within 30 minutes. The next day, there was still 1 Red Phalarope there. In Lancaster County, in south-central PA, a Jaeger (possibly Parasitic) was seen at the Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area on October 30. The next day, further south in the county, 2 Red Phalaropes were seen in a flooded field, near a town called Gap. The birds were actively feeding and very tame, close to a road. In York County, in south-central PA, at the Pinchot State Park on October 30, there were 20 Common Loons and at least 50 Buffleheads.

In Lebanon County, in south-central PA, on November 4, a few days after Sandy, there were as many as five species of Grebes on one lake — Memorial Lake: a Western Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Eared Grebe, Horned Grebe, and Pied-billed Grebe. Having those five on one body of water in Pennsylvania is unprecedented.

After a big storm, where do displaced birds go? How often do the individual birds recover? And how much is a particular species impacted? These are all questions for another time.

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