

PELAGIC BIRDING OUTING:

By J. Dan McAskil

The Natural History Society's brought 16 birders out for the pelagic birding outing to the waters off North Lake and East Point on August 28th. On this sunny, beautiful day, the birders assembled at North Lake wharf to join Captain Jeffrey MacNeill aboard the *Wendy RV* a 12.2 metre (40 feet), government approved fibreglass boat. After a safety briefing aboard the boat, Jeffrey slipped the lines at 0810 hrs and we headed for a point 7.4 km (four nautical miles) off the harbour. On the way off shore, first one then two minke whales spouted mist as they fished mackerel and other small fish. This thrilled the naturalists aboard and we moved closer then stopped to watch and enjoy their movements for about ten minutes.

From this stop, we continued offshore until when we reached our destination in about 27 metres (90 feet) of water. Here, Jeffrey anchored and set up a chum line using a plastic net stocking containing about 25 kilograms (~60 pounds) of Atlantic silversides which was set over the side. The chum line is used to attract birds which will follow the fish scales, oil and small bits of silversides drifting out of the stocking with the tide. While the chum line was being set, the first trickle of pelagic birding excitement came with Dan Kennedy spotting a Wilson's Storm Petrel. It came within 50 metres of the boat and most people were able to get a good view of the petrel. A small flock of adult and immature Great Black-backed Gulls and a few adult Herring Gulls landed near the boat hoping for food. In the distance, a few immature Northern Gannet were seen and both immature and then mature gannets appeared within a short distance. In the hopes of attracting gannets and other pelagic birds, Jeffrey and I threw out a number of tinker mackerel which Jeffrey had aboard. The Great Black-backed Gulls responded quickly creating a feeding frenzy as they competed for the mackerel. A number of gannets came to the aerial display but only one or two at a time were seen relatively close to the boat. Jeffrey threw silversides into the waters and more Herring Gulls flew in towards the drifting silversides. They responded better to the much smaller silversides.

After a few hours of chumming and some mackerel fishing, we added a few Common Tern to our list and then decided to head to East Point in the hopes that there would be more pelagic bird activity there. The breeze had picked up and the birders sought shelter as much as possible from the spray. On the way, another Minke whale was spotted, a few bumblebees were seen flying by, and more gannets terns could be seen flying and fishing in the distance.

The waters off East Point were much choppier as we cleared the lee of the Island. The swell was running up to two metres at times. We stopped near the cardinal whistle buoy located 3.3 km (1.78 nautical miles) off East Point and started drifting. Because of the large size of the boulders in this area, Jeffrey indicated that an anchor could not be set. Jeffrey set out the chum stocking and we watched for about 30 minutes. It was very quiet although some Great Cormorants and a good number of Double-crested Cormorants were seen fishing and flying around us. In the distance, a small flock of gannets plunged into the depths searching for fish. By then, we were out of time and started back to North Lake. On the way, Jeffrey pulled close to shore to allow those aboard to watch a group of gray seals. They appeared to be quite curious in the singing of one of the members aboard. Shortly after this, south of Surveyor's Point at East Lake, two adult Bald Eagles were seen soaring over the rise of land. We arrived dockside at noon.

Despite the lack of pelagic birds, everyone aboard enjoyed the outing. Many asked that this become an annual outing by the Society.

Editor's Note: Pelagic birds are going birds that, outside of their breeding season, spend most of their time at sea. Locally these include gannets, storm-petrels, shearwaters, dovekie, puffin, and murre.

SOCIETY FIELD TRIP:

By Eric Marcum

Participants on the Society's field trip on Sunday, July 31st saw a variety of shorebirds. The highlights were at Rollo Bay with one Ruddy Turnstone, many Short-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, a Killdeer and a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. By the way it acted, a Spotted Sandpiper was probably breeding at