

F O C U S



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A Pelagic Trip to Cordell Bank

Oceanic Wildlife

Rich Stallcup

Cordell Bank is an underwater ridge along the continental shelf edge, 25 miles west of the Point Reyes lighthouse. Food-web productivity there attracts pelagic (open-ocean) wildlife—which draws people, by boat from Bodega Bay. — Editor

Dawn at Puerto Bodego, August 7, 2006. Thirty-six birders, anxious about the prospects of a day at sea, shlep their gear aboard and clean their “bins.” We fire up the engines of the 58-foot fishing vessel *New Sea Angler*.

The orientation talk covers how to use the boat’s shape as a clock to locate wildlife (for example, 3:00 means to starboard), our 80-mile course to and beyond the continental shelf, and the *weather*. Weather to mariners has little to do with sun or rain, warm or cold, but is all about sea-surface conditions and wind.

Soon we are motoring between channel markers and calling out shorebirds like Surfbirds and Red Knots, but these are incidental sightings today, because we are seeking birds of the open ocean. This trip is in search of those fine birds that would never willingly go to land except to breed—*seabirds*. We slow to admire an out-of-range Black Skimmer resting among Elegant and Caspian Terns. Then we clear the breakwaters and head west-southwest, to sea.

The water is calm, and a high overcast will keep us from having to look into glare. The weather is perfect.

Just two miles offshore we are coursing through shearwaters, thousands of them, mostly Sooty’s at this time of year but also many Pink-footeds. “Rooster-tail” splashes

a mile west betray the presence of a pod of Dall’s porpoise. As usual, they charge straight toward us and are promptly leaping and diving just below the bow, inches beyond the loving gaze of delighted terrestrial mammals.

Our skipper tells me there is more “bait” (small schooling fish) in these waters than he has ever seen during his many years of fishing—“but no krill.” During this day we will *see* anchovies and sardines, mola mola, and blue and salmon sharks on the surface, and mackerel just below.

A few Rhinoceros Auklets, Pomarine Jaegers, two Common Terns, and small flocks of dapper Sabine’s Gulls are seen well by everyone. The next scream is “*Whale*,” and we are glued to our optics, watching a humpback breach ten times in a row! There are many humpbacks here and a couple of their small cousins, minke whales.

A single Arctic Tern (among the first of many thousands that will pass here in the next month) strokes southward, followed closely by a Parasitic Jaeger, a pirate that will plunder the tern’s fish. There have been a few Northern Fulmars along the way, but as we cross the shelf-break into deeper water there are more; and, abruptly, storm-petrels—hundreds of the expected Ashy and eight Wilson’s.

Missing from the roll call: Cassin’s Auklets. We have been here over the shallows of Cordell Bank (the highest seamount peak is only 120 feet below the surface) many times in August, and until 2005 there were always large numbers of Cassin’s. Last year I counted 22... today, *six!* (See this *Observer’s* page 1 note.)



PHIL EAGER

This leatherback turtle was a thrilling find.

Careful scrutiny of sitting shearwater flocks reveals a few Buller’s, the first of this year for California waters. While doing a Black-footed Albatross count (110 for the day), I see the unique, pale dorsal fins of Risso’s dolphins, and we slide back to the northwest for a closer look. Beyond them a large mixed pod of incoming small cetaceans (Pacific white-sided and northern right whale dolphins) closes down until we are surrounded.

East of the Bank we often see sitting Tufted Puffins, and today is no exception. Two birds in their fanciest caberet costumes, unwilling (or too well fed) to fly. Hundreds of point-blank photos are made by everyone with a camera (and some with telephones!).

On the return trip, people are beginning to talk about what a great day it has been; I interrupt to say we often have something extra-special near the very end. Close enough to the headlands to hear the oystercatchers, we gently slip up next to a five-foot leatherback nosing at moon jellies. Sea turtles are very rare at this latitude, and everyone on board is ecstatic.

We have seen many thousands of seabirds, twelve species of marine mammals, an oceanic reptile—and nobody got seasick. It has been a very good day.

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