









# Rare Birds in Venango County

by Russ States

Hurricane Hugo was scheduled to reach Venango County sometime late Friday, 22 September 1989. I was awakened by a call on Monday morning (Sept. 25) from Nick Kerlin, Park Superintendent at Oil Creek State Park. He said he had an unusual bird, I said "oh...," and he said he thought it might be a Greater Shearwater, so I said (or at least thought) "right," but as he proceeded to tell me where he found the bird I realized he was serious. The best bird to find its way to Venango County since I've been here and I almost slept through it.

I quickly learned that he had found the bird on Sunday morning at the Park Office when one of the park maintenance personnel came in and asked where he got the duck. Nick responded, "What duck," and went out to investigate. The bird was just sitting against the building, so he picked it up, checked it for broken bones, and then put it in a box. Because of obligations at work he was unable to do anything about the bird on Sunday, so he tried to feed it (it wouldn't eat) and put the box in a warm place.

Now, on Monday, Nick was trying to contact someone to find out what and how to feed the bird as well as what to do with it. I gave him Jean Stull's number and told him he should also try to contact Jerry McWilliams, figuring that while they might not know what or how to feed the bird they might know someone who would.

At this point I grabbed my camera and film and some bird books and headed for the park office. I won't say that I made it in record time, but I did hurry. After all, the bird was in a box and not going anywhere, but I did want to see it alive. After arriving at the park office I found Nick on the phone talking to Jerry. He didn't know of anyone to contact about feeding the bird, but was very much interested in the identification, etc. Talking to Nick I learned that he had called a lot of people, most of whom were not home and so, as of yet, had not gotten any help. He was waiting for a return call from the Pittsburgh Aviary hoping they could help. In the meantime we decided to go look at and photograph the bird.

Nick very carefully lifted the bird from its box (very carefully, because the previous day it took a piece out of his finger). It was a beautiful bird. Nice warm brown plumage, with the head much darker than the body, giving an almost

capped appearance. The body was all white underneath, with the wings brown and white. And it was definitely a tube-nose! (See complete description elsewhere.) I'm going to label this bird as Bird A, because as it turns out more were to show up.

Just as we were noting details of the bird, a reporter from the local newspaper arrived and after getting what information she could from us, wanted to photograph it. So, after she took some photographs of Nick and I holding the bird, Nick and I took turns holding and photographing the bird.

We put the bird back in the box and went back to the park office to see if anyone had returned calls. No one had, so Nick decided to call the Game Commission and see what they had to say. They gave him the number of Harriet Wilson, a bird and animal rehabilitator, located near Meadville. We then headed for Meadville.

When we arrived she looked the bird over and said it had a serious concussion. She gave it some medication and put it in a warm dark place. Just a couple of minutes later someone from the Game Commission came in with another bird. (I'll call this one Bird B). This one had a broken wing. Though I only got a quick look, Bird B looked to be the same species as Bird A. The differences I noted at the time were Bird B had some brown splotches on the belly and there were white speckles on the forehead.

Bird B was found about two miles west of Franklin at the Venango Manor County Home, Sugarcreek Township, sometime on Sunday, 24 September 1989.

Jerry went to Meadville after work. He just got quick looks at the birds and was able to take some photographs of Bird B. I talked to him that evening and we discussed characteristics of the birds. I gave him the description of Bird A. He called back later and said he thought they were Black-capped Petrels and not Greater Shearwaters. He thought the bill was too short, and all the books showed brown marking in the white of the wing, and the fact that the undertail coverts were white instead of dark. We left it at that and decided to wait until the pictures came back. I then called Frank Haas to let him know that we had an unusual bird and told him the identity was still up in the air.

On Tuesday I got a call from Dan

Brauning who was interested in the bird (if it died) for the collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

That evening I called Madge Hribar to get some information and as we were talking she mentioned that her husband, Lenny (who works for the Game Commission), had brought home a bird that they thought was a gull, but it had died. This sounded like too much of a coincidence so I immediately started asking some questions. I learned that he had thrown the bird onto a deer pit in one of the Game Commission's propagation areas. By this time Lenny had looked at the picture of the bird which was in the paper that day and said it looked like the bird he had. I made arrangements to meet him on Wednesday at 2 p.m.

A little after 1:30 on Wednesday I grabbed my camera and bird books and left for my meeting with Lenny. We went to the deep pit and picked up the bird. This could have been nasty since the bird had lain there a whole day, but the temperature had stayed in the 40's and the bird was in the shade in a plastic bag. It was another tubenose! (This bird will be Bird C.) I decided it was the same species as the other two, so now whatever they turned out to be, three of them had been found in Venango County. I took pictures and found out from Lenny that this bird had been found by a Pete Grove of Rockwood Avenue in Oil City. I called him later that day and learned that he found the bird on his neighbor's front yard about 2 p.m. on Saturday, 23 September 1989.

Lenny said he would put the bird in the freezer at the Franklin Regional Office. I thanked him for his cooperation and set out for home.

Thursday morning Nick called me to say that Harriet Wilson had called to tell him both birds had died, one on Wednesday evening and the other on Thursday morning.

On Sunday, 1 October, I decided to do a little birding at Presque Isle. Out on the point I met Ed Kwater who told me that another bird had been found in Elizabeth Township, Allegheny County, and that as far as he knew at that point it was a Black-capped Petrel. I'll call this one Bird D.

By Monday, one week after I first heard about these birds, I still wasn't completely certain what they were. On

Monday, my slides came in the mail. And they were good! I called Nick and he had received his slides also. After viewing the slides, we decided to go with Black-capped Petrel.

Tuesday, when I talked with Dr. Kenneth Parkes of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, he told me that he had the bird found in Allegheny Co and that it was a Black-capped Petrel. He had received it from the Pittsburgh Aviary.

On Wednesday, 4 October, I decided I needed to talk to Harriet Wilson to get more complete information about the birds. She told me that she had gotten rid of them as soon as possible because someone had called and offered her \$500 for the "rare bird." She was pretty upset about this and called the Game Commission to tell them to come and get the birds (they had died by this time). She said when he called he didn't even know if they were alive or dead and she wasn't even sure if he knew what the bird was. Personally, I wonder what anyone would do with a dead petrel, but then people think we're strange.

She had been able to get the birds to respond, got their fluid levels up, was feeding them sea minnows and thought they were improving before they died. She thought they died from either liver or kidney failure. Everyone else from either the museums or the aviary said that no one has ever been able to keep petrels alive and that they probably had no chance from the start.

Then on Monday, 23 October, I made a few, and what I hope will be final (because this bird has cost me a fortune) phone calls. I called Dan Brauning and found out that the Academy of Natural Sciences had received one of the Venango County birds. I then called Dr. Parkes and learned that they were supposed to get one of the Venango County birds, but had not yet received it. And he said that he had a message from Kevin McGowan at Cornell University that he had a Black-capped Petrel that was found in northern Pennsylvania. So I called him to see about this bird. It turns out that it was a fifth Pennsylvania record (this will be Bird E). It was found near Nicholson, Wyoming County, and taken to a rehabilitator in Binghamton, New York, and when it died she called him. He also knew

of another of this species found near Elmira, New York.

I made one final call to the Game Commission and they told me that birds A and B were still in their possession. One of these would go to the Carnegie Museum and the other would be mounted and put in the Waterfowl Museum at Pymatuning.

I've tried to piece the story together as much as possible and I want to thank all those with whom I talked and anyone who was able to provide any information.



*Black-capped Petrel, Oil Creek State Park, 9/25/89. Photo by Nick Kerlin.*



*Black-capped Petrel, Oil Creek State Park, 9/25/89. Photo by Russ States.*

In this section I will give as much statistical information on each of the five Black-capped Petrels found in Pennsylvania after Hurricane Hugo as I was able to gather. I've labeled the Birds A through E in the order in which I learned about them.

Bird A - Found on Sunday, 24 September 1989

019-02-1989

about 9 a.m. by Nick Kerlin, in Oil Creek State Park, Venango County, at the Park Office. Was taken to Harriet Wilson, an animal rehabilitator on 25 September. Had a severe concussion. Died probably of liver or kidney failure Thursday morning 28 September 1989.

Description - length 16 1/4", wingspan 42". Upper body and upper wings dark brown. Head from bill back much darker than body giving a capped appearance. Underside, excluding wing, all white. Tail very worn; had brown edging and white to base of tail. Underside of tail is all white. Bill black, with a very hooked appearance and tubular nostrils. Feet pink with black edges. White on nape, but not all the way across the back of the neck. Eye dark brown. Underside of wing has a dark brown leading edge, white in the middle and a gray trailing edge.

Bird B - Found near Venango Manor County Home, two miles west of Franklin, Sugar Creek Township, Venango County by persons unknown on Sunday, 24 September 1989. Also taken to H. Wilson. Had a broken wing. Died Wednesday evening, 27 September 1989.

Description - length 13", wingspan 36 1/4". Very similar to Bird A except for brown splotching on belly and white speckling in forehead.

Bird C - Found on Saturday, 23 September 1989 about 2 p.m. on Rockwood Avenue, Oil City, Venango County, by Pete Grove in his neighbor's front yard. Given to the Game Commission on Saturday evening. Died sometime Monday, 25 September 1989. Given to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

Description - length 16", wingspan unknown. Appearance nearly identical to Bird A.

Bird D - Found on Saturday, 23 September 1989 on the west bank of the Youghiogheny River in Buena Vista, Allegheny County, by Des Moines Field. Taken to the Pittsburgh Aviary where it died 27 September 1989. Given to the Carnegie Museum. Description - I have none of this bird.

Bird E - Found on Saturday, 23 September 1989 in a parking lot in Nicholson, Wyoming County, by persons unknown. Taken to a rehabilitator in Binghamton, New York. Died 24 September 1989. At present in the Ornithological Collection at Cornell University.

Description - I have none of this bird.

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Tabulation Form - Round One**

Species: Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata*)

Date of Sighting: 24 September 1989 to 24 September 1989

Location: OIL CREEK STATE PARK

County: VENANGO

Observer(s): Russ States

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: PORC Archives

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

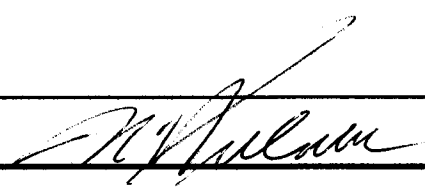
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead	X							
<del>D. Heathcote</del> D. Couchman	X							
P. Hess	X							
J. Stanley	X							
<del>B. Reid</del> F. W. Tarr	X							
<del>R. Leberman</del> P. Rodewald	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 3/2/03