

**PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM**

This form is presented as a convenience and guide. It can be used if desired, but is not necessary for submitting a report. Species requiring documentation are those on the Review List or not on the Official List of Birds of Pennsylvania. Send documentation to:

**Nick Pulcinella, Secretary**  
**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**  
**210 Welcome Ave.**  
**Norwood, PA 19074.**  
**nickpulcinella@comcast.net**

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**SPECIES** (common and scientific name): Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*)

**Subspecies** (if known): NA

**NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS:** 1 **SEX(ES):** NA

**AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S)** (e.g. immature; adult in breeding plumage; year for gulls; basic or alternate if you prefer those terms; state of molt if applicable): Adult (presumed, found no sources detailing plumages at younger ages)

**DATE OF OBSERVATION:** September 19, 2003 **TIME:** ~2:00 PM

**LOCATION** (city, borough, township): Benner Township

**EXACT SITE** (e.g. name of park, lake, road): seen from the shoulder of northbound Rt. 220, or I-99 (the newly constructed portion northeast of State College. This section of the highway passes through property belonging to Rockview State Correctional Institution, before mile marker (and exit) #80.

**OBSERVER REPORTING:**

Name John Yerger  
Address 11710 Colman Rd  
City Philadelphia State PA ZIP 19154  
e-mail (optional): jyerger24@yahoo.com phone (optional): (215) 956-0984

**OTHER OBSERVERS** (only those who saw and identified the bird with you):

Daniel Hinnebusch, Michael Lohr, Jake Mohlmann, Lewis Grove, Kristi Miller

**HABITAT** (e.g. mowed field, woodland edge, any other details): Open and agricultural countryside with scattered trees – not near water as expected, presumably due to being storm-carried.

**DISTANCE TO BIRD:** Upon initial sighting, perhaps one tenth of a mile. After exiting vehicle to obtain a better view, bird came as close approximately 30-40 feet. After this view bird was viewed as it flew towards treeline approximately one half mile to three-quarters of a mile away, at which point it was lost from view behind the trees.

**VIEWING CONDITIONS** (sky, weather, position of sun relative to you): Sky was overcast, with a very light rain falling at the time. Direct sun was nowhere to be seen, but distant visibility was only moderately limited.

**OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED:** Celestron Ultima 10x50 binoculars; also for a briefer time, a Bushnell 15-45x50 spotting scope.

**DESCRIPTION/ BEHAVIOR** (Include as much detail as you observed – size relative to other species present; "jizz"= e.g. posture, body shape, and proportions; colors and patterns of plumage; bill, eye, and leg characteristics; other features relevant to this individual):

I have combined these two categories into one section:

En route to I-80 on Route 220 (I-99) northeast of State College, I (being the lead vehicle out of two) spotted an immature Bald Eagle. As we slowed to get a better look at the Eagle and another smaller bird that was near it, Jake Mohlmann exclaimed from the passenger's seat

"STOP! It's a petrel or something!" I braked quickly and Mike Lohr (behind me) did the same. As soon as I stepped out of my car I saw what he was looking at, and realized Jake had been talking about the second bird (not the eagle). Immediately I snapped my binoculars up and focused through the light rain, only to behold a *tube-nosed seabird!* The truly incredible thing was that at this point it was close enough to actually see the tube-shaped portion on top of the bill.

Right away we had the order determined, as Procellariiformes are the only group with tube-nosed bills. This eliminated any of the members of the family Laridae or certain Pelecaniformes, which are roughly similar in structure, but do not share numerous other characteristics. My first impulse, having fresh knowledge from my first pelagic the month prior, was to call out "Shearwater?" It was smaller than the Eagle, but by comparison you could see it was a fairly large bird. I knew it wasn't big enough to be an albatross, but the wing structure when it turned and the overall structure seemed reminiscent of one. It was certainly too big and didn't have the right shape or flight pattern to be a Storm-petrel. It also did not have the slightly more bent wings and pointed tail that Petrel images I had studied seemed to have. This bird was relatively heavy-bodied, with wings that were long compared to the body, though I wouldn't characterize it as lanky. The wingtips didn't quite come to a sharp point, but I wouldn't characterize them as rounded. The best description I could offer is a worn-down point. When it did flap on occasion, it seemed to flap its wings laboriously. The bill looked thick (read: heavy) and was a dusky yellowish color. My memory is not clear as to the structure of the nail, and neither is it mentioned in the brief field notes I quickly jotted down afterwards. Daniel Hinnebusch, the only other birder present who had been on a pelagic trip, responded that he thought it was a Shearwater as well. However, we quickly agreed to just call out field marks and worry about the solid identification call later.

At this moment the bird was either frightened by us clamoring out of our vehicles, or was being chased by the immature Bald Eagle; I'm still not sure which, though my birding companions insist it was being chased. It proceeded to soar (at first no more than 40 feet in front of me) very low over four lanes of traffic and a grassy median area. It did not flap much, but seemed to glide effortlessly, low over the highway, tilting itself only briefly at the grassy median area. While it was doing this, I was able to follow it with my binoculars and saw that the entire back and wings were the color of wet gray-brown sand. The coloration grew darker moving out from the body towards the tips of the wings, and a vague dark "M" pattern formed by darker leading edges to both wings was discernible, but subtle and did not stand out. As it tilted at the median, I caught a perfect glimpse of very clean, smudgeless white underwings edged in black. The throat was equally clean, though the brown from the head came down into the sides of the head and created the undefined border of the white throat. When it tilted upright again so I could see its upperparts, I noted no visible white anywhere. The trailing edge of the tail was darker than that of the rump and uppertail coverts. The tip of the tail also came to more of a broad U than a V. At no place on the upperparts did there appear to be sharp delineations between colors; all lent to more of a gradient impression.

Here the bird became more distant. I grabbed the handiest spotting scope, and was fortunate to view the subject through the scope. For the next minute or so, it proceeded to fly above the trees in an erratic manner, almost as if it didn't know where to go next. It flew back and forth, dipping behind the trees occasionally. Most of the looks I had were of the clean white underwings and underbody that I had seen at a closer range, but now the bird was tilting and circling about wildly so I could only make out this feature. Finally it disappeared completely behind the treeline.

**VOCALIZATIONS:** None

**SUPPORTING EVIDENCE IF ANY:**

Photograph \_\_\_\_\_ Video recording \_\_\_\_\_ Audio recording \_\_\_\_\_ Drawing \_\_\_\_\_

Photographer/recorder/illustrator:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail (optional) \_\_\_\_\_ phone (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Please include a copy of the photograph or recording with your report, and accompany it with a complete written documentation if the identification is obvious to you. If you made a drawing, please include it.

**SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES (how you eliminated others):**

Immediately after the sighting, I flipped through "The Sibley Guide to Birds" to determine if our bird could have been anything other than a Cory's Shearwater. Northern Fulmar has a similarly colored bill, but the similarities end there. It had neither the right colors nor the right shape. None of the Gadfly Petrels, Pacific or Atlantic, come close to having the right underwing pattern, not to mention the differences in tail shape and the fact that the bills are too small and black. As for Greater Shearwater, I saw hundreds of them on a pelagic off the coast of Maine several weeks later, and I can safely say that this bird is easily separated from the Cory's. Not only are the underparts completely wrong, but there is a definitive white collar on the nape of the neck and capped appearance to the head that would have been obvious from the views I had. While highly unlikely, the Pacific Shearwaters can be easily eliminated because while Buller's has clean underparts, it has a gray bill, and too strikingly contrasted upperparts. Pink-footed Shearwater again has too mottled an underwing. Flesh-footed Shearwater is too dark; Black-vented Shearwater has too thin a bill, differently shaped and colored wings, etc. Though I have only seen Audubon's Shearwater (not Manx), both of these Shearwaters appear to have the wrong wing proportions and not the right bill shape/color either. I know from experience that Audubon's flap too fast; our bird flapped only occasionally and deliberately. The 'dark shearwaters' are, as the name suggests, too dark. As I mentioned earlier, though the Storm-petrels also have tubed-nostrils, they are too small and their flight patterns far too different; in essence they look like a very different bird.

Peter Harrison's book "A Field Guide to Seabirds of the World" features a great many other seabirds that would be rarer in Pennsylvania than the Cory's Shearwater, but I've looked at them as well. (There is, after all, that report of a Kermadec Petrel from Hawk Mountain...) All of these birds can be successfully eliminated from consideration for reasons similar to those of their fellow group members, discussed above. I suppose Wedge-tailed Shearwater could be considered close, but the bill is still not heavy-looking enough or yellow. Harrison says Grey Petrel 'recalls' Cory's Shearwater, but the underwings are very dark. Additionally, page 295 of Harrison's book gives a black-and-white sketch of the Cory's Shearwater, with the description: "At close range, look for diagnostic yellow bill." I saw this bird at close range, and while I would like to comment that the bill looked duskiest than other Cory's Shearwaters I remember from a North Carolina pelagic, it was still distinctly yellow. I presume lighting and/or poor health of the bird could have affected the hue of the yellow. I would also like to say that our bird seemed to vary slightly from Sibley's drawings in that the sandy-brown seemed a little darker than what he shows. I presume this could have been due to lighting and wet plumage, too. Conversely, it did not look as gray as the picture on page 66 of Harrison's book. The picture on that same page of the underside of the bird, however, is spot on with what I saw. I did not notice the 'variable white' Sibley mentions in the uppertail, but then it is not a field mark that would stand out and it is, indeed, 'variable.'

Just as I was ready to submit this report, I happened to peruse "The Sibley Guide to Bird Behavior" and felt that after writing the report and *not* consulting these resources, the fact that they agree so strongly with my observations is a good sign: "The genus *Calonectris* contains the largest shearwater in the world, Cory's Shearwater (*C. diomedea*), which can be distinguished in flight by its heavy, lumbering wing flapping." This quote characterizes the bird I saw very well. I then borrowed a copy of "Smithsonian Birds of North America" and found the following passage which further solidifies my opinion of this bird's identification: "The largest shearwater found along the Atlantic Coast skims the surface of the ocean with slow wing beats and a buoyant flight similar to that of the albatross... The large pale bill as well as the way the brown upperparts blend gradually with the white underparts without producing a capped appearance is distinctive." Also: "Cory's is the only Atlantic shearwater that occasionally soars."

In essence, from my research it seems that there is no other tube-nosed bird in the world that has the combination of a yellow bill, sandy-brown upperparts, with a clean underbody and underwings edged in black. The distinctive flight pattern also strongly supports the identification as a Cory's Shearwater. I hope that the other details I have offered above sufficiently supplement these basic observations.

**DISCUSSION** – Anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

I find it interesting that the Cory's Shearwater from the Centre County rehab center (currently under review as I understand it) was picked up in Mifflin County. My birding companions and I have since debated whether or not our bird could be the same as the other. The coincidence that this bird was found exhausted the next day only 15-20 miles from where we saw it lends itself to the possibility that both birds are one and the same. However, the odds that this bird would be spotted once and then found a second time seem incredible to me. It should also be noted that our bird was headed in a northwesterly direction, and while a confused bird could probably take all kinds of unexplainable turns, I would imagine that the bird would just continue in one direction until it found some open water rather than doing a complete about face to return from whence it came. Either way, I would like to believe that the more verifiable picture for the Mifflin County shearwater demonstrates that our Cory's Shearwater is possible also.

**PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND/OR SIMILAR SPECIES:** Almost exactly one month prior to the sighting I took my first pelagic trip with Brian Patteson out of North Carolina. I had the opportunity to study such species as: Cory's Shearwater, Sooty Tern, Bridled Tern, Wilson's Storm-petrel, Band-rumped Storm-petrel, Black-capped Petrel, and Audubon's Shearwater. In the first week of October, 2003 (after this sighting), I had the good fortune to take another pelagic trip from Bar Harbor, Maine with Lysle Brinker. On this trip I had good views of: Greater Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Great Skua, Leach's Storm-petrel, and others.

**ARE YOU POSITIVE OF YOUR IDENTIFICATION ? (why or why not):** I am very positive of my identification. I do not feel comfortable submitting any report without absolute certainty. I had several views of the bird at relatively close range from a variety of angles, and it fit exactly with my previous (though admittedly limited) experience with this species.

**REFERENCES CONSULTED:**

During observation:

Sibley, David Allen. "The Sibley Guide to Birds." National Audubon Society, New York: 2000. (First ed, seventh printing).

After observation:

Harrison, Peter. "A Field Guide to Seabirds of the World." Viking Penguin Inc, New York: 1987

Sibley, David Allen. "The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior." Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 2001

Aldop III, Fred J. "Smithsonian Birds of North America." DK Publishing Inc, New York: 2001.

**DATE OF THIS REPORT:** April 14, 2004

**SIGNATURE OF OBSERVER** \_\_\_\_\_

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation – Round One**

Species: Cory's Shearwater (Calonectris diomedea)

Date of Sighting: 19 September 2003 to 19 September 2003

Location: BENNER TOWNSHIP

County : CENTRE

Observer(s): John Yerger et al.

Date of Submission: 2004

Submitted by: John Yerger et al.

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut			X					
D. Heathcote			<del>X</del>					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer			X					
R. Leberman			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6					
DECISION			X					

**Comments:**

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

10/26/05