

Leach's Storm Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*)
Yellow Creek State Park, Indiana County, PA
September 19, 2003

Jim Valimont, Paul Hess and I joined the ranks of numerous birders in searching area lakes for storm related birds during the passage of Hurricane (now a tropical storm) Isabel. We were in communication with several birders during the day and we received a call from Margaret Higbee that there was a Sabine's Gull at Yellow Creek State Park.

While observing the gull, another bird resting on the water with the gull caught my attention, as well as other birders present. At first (not thinking) I passed it off as a Black Tern. Then Margaret noted a Black Tern would not be black at this time of year. Indeed, this is the case as they would have molted into non-breeding plumage (or be in juvenile plumage).

Next, the group began to discuss the features of the bird, noting its dark brown/black color, rounded head, stubby bill, and wings which projected beyond the tail. We also noted the smaller size in relation to the Sabine's Gull which it was adjacent to on the water.

We decided to get a closer look, and after relocating ourselves, we had a better view of the bird and several in the group noted it was a storm petrel, and probably a leach's.

As we observed the bird, we noted the length of the wings, overall shape of the bird, particularly the bill and head, and the white rump.

DESCRIPTION:

Storm Petrel Determination: The bird was identified as a storm petrel by the general appearance and shape. The bird was very dark brown, small, and sat with an upright posture on the water, unlike a tern or gull. The bill was stubby and with a slight downcurve, very different from a tern (longer, sharper bill with a slight downcurve in some species, dagger straight on others) or any small gull (broad straight bill, or short straight bill as in a Bonaparte's). Terns don't often rest on water, and medium to large resting gulls do not hold the rear of the body at such an angle. Small gulls such as Bonaparte's approach this posture, however they are not nearly as dark as this bird.

A sooty tern would be larger, and would show a white forehead (adult), face and breast and would have a longer, straight bill. A juvenile would be dark, but the shape of the bird and long, straight bill is different than a storm petrel. A bridled tern would show white on the forehead, face and breast and lighter plumage overall. A Black Tern would be in it's non-breeding plumage, with a piebald black and white plumage (a Black Tern in this plumage was present). All of those species lack white rumps.

- Small, dark brown bird resting on the water with an upright, alert posture, head and neck erect, and tail held at an approximately 45 degree angle to the surface of the water.
- Head, breast, belly and tail dark brown.
- Bill: black, stubby, slightly downcurved.
- Wings (at rest): dark brown with blackish primaries. There was a pale tan area between the base of the primaries and the remainder of the wing. The wings projected beyond the tail.

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- **Wings (in flight):** dark brown, with blackish primaries and secondaries, and a tan carpal bar extending along the wing coverts (on the upperside of the wing). The underside of the wings appeared all dark, lacking any obvious lighter color.
- **Rump:** white; conspicuous when the bird was in flight, or when preening on the water. There was a dark, thin wedge extending into the rump from the back. When the bird turned on its side to preen, a dark blackish / brownish line extended through the rump, dividing it. The line was concealed at times, and was revealed during preening. When the bird was at rest, the white rump was not visible.
- **The tail** was moderately forked (not deeply like a barn swallow, but more than a notch), and was easily seen while the bird turned on its side and spread its tail while preening.

I observed the bird through a Leica Telvid spotting scope with a 20-60 power zoom lens. The bird was observed at 60 power most of the time. We were approximately 100 yards from the bird, but viewing was clear as we were positioned on a small hill above the lake.

Sibley is the only reference I have that illustrates storm petrels resting on the water, but does not show the wings projecting beyond the tail for Leach's.

Comparison with other species:

Comparing other dark storm petrels with white rumps found in the Atlantic Ocean off the U.S. coast assisted in our identification.

A Wilson's Storm Petrel would show white on the sides of the vent and surrounding area on the body near the base of the tail. In flight, the white would be easily visible in this area. The white rump would not be divided by a dark line. Although some populations of Leach's lack this dividing line, this individual had it. A Wilson's tail is not forked.

Band-rumped Storm Petrel has a lighter carpal bar compared to Leach's. The tail is not forked. Some white should be visible at the sides of the tail on a resting bird.

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Pennsylvania Rare Bird Report

Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*)

DATE: 19 September 2003, 5:15 PM to 6:50 PM

LOCATION: Lake at Yellow Creek State Park, Indiana County

OBSERVER REPORTING:

Paul Hess

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OTHER OBSERVERS: Margaret and Roger Higbee, Mike Fialkovich, Jim Valimont, Peter Robinson, Dave Wilton, Carol Guba, Ross Gallardy, several others.

HABITAT: Open water on large lake.

DISTANCE TO BIRD: 150 yards at nearest; 200 yards at farthest.

VIEWING CONDITIONS: Diffused sun through full overcast, dry after earlier passage of remnants of Hurricane Isabel. I first viewed the bird looking northeast with diffused sun behind me. Next, for a closer look, I went to another side of the lake and viewed it looking southwest with sun about one-quarter to my left.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT: Leica 8x32 binoculars and Kowa TSN-822 scope. I also used others' Swarovski and Leica scopes.

DESCRIPTION:

Size: Sitting on the water, it was about 2/3 the length of a Sabine's Gull that it stayed only a few feet away from during the entire time I watched it. I did not see it in flight.

Jizz: It was very small-headed and tiny-billed compared with its overall body size, and it had a conspicuously long primary primary projection past the tertials. But though the long primaries projected far beyond the tertials, they did not project beyond the long tail. The jizz quickly struck me as that of a storm-petrel.

Colors and patterns of plumage: It was entirely dark blackish-brown, although the primaries and the tail appeared to be slightly darker and more blackish without a brownish tint. A pale off-white or tannish carpal bar was prominent on the coverts of the folded wing. A large white "rump patch" was conspicuously visible when the bird lifted its wings to preen. The patch narrowed gradually as it extended down the upper tail coverts and did not extend down the sides of the tail coverts. The dark feathers of the back projected down into the center of the rump patch in a sharp triangle, and the distal end of the patch was not straight across. The result was a V-shaped appearance of the white patch. The patch was not visible on the sides and undertail coverts of the floating bird. Others said they saw a dark line down the center of the patch when the bird was in flight. I did not see it on the resting bird even when it showed the patch while preening.

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Bill: Short and steeply downcurved into a slight hook at the end of the upper mandible. A short “tubenose” at the base of the upper mandible was visible even at that long distance, giving the bill its unique storm-petrel shape.

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES:

None of the completely dark Atlantic petrels and shearwaters would look so relatively small as only two-thirds the size of the little Sabine's Gull.

The two other common dark Atlantic storm-petrels, Wilson's and Band-rumped, are eliminated by several characters:

- * Wilson's would have a shorter, less elongated jizz overall. Both of those species would have shorter tails relative to the primaries, and the primaries would thus project conspicuously beyond the tail. But overall, the length of the primaries and tail would appear much shorter compared to the body than Leach's very long wings and tail.

- * Neither Wilson's nor Band-rumped would have a strongly V-shaped rump patch; their patch would be only shallowly curved on the front and rear edges.

- * Wilson's and Band-rumped would show the white of the patch extending down the sides of the coverts, but this bird's patch did not. No sign of white was visible from the side of the floating bird (though I have sometimes found this hard to see on both of the other species).

- * Wilson's and Band-rumped do not show the overall distinctively brownish tone of the Leach's, at least in the experience I have had with them.

I did not see the bird in flight so as to describe Leach's unique style, though others described it as “like a butterfly”.

Frankly, I cannot eliminate dark, white-rumped Pacific and Indian Ocean storm-petrels. It has been more than 20 years since I have seen a few European Storm-Petrels, and I have no experience with the other dark, white-rumped species.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: At sea off the Atlantic during the last 10 years I have seen about 2,000 Wilson's, about 200 Band-rumped, and about 30 Leach's.

REFERENCES CONSULTED: None during observation and note-taking; NGS and Sibley immediately afterward; Harrison's two books, plus Enticott & Tipling, and Mullarney et al. at home later, even though those were not truly necessary.

Note: Mike Fialkovich may provide a video-capture to accompany his description, though I do not know whether it will be diagnostic.

This report was written on September 21, with the description and observational details taken from original notes at the scene.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*)

Date of Sighting: 19 September 2003 to 19 September 2003

Location: YELLOW CREEK STATE PARK

County : INDIANA

Observer(s): Mike Fialkovich, Jim Valimont, Paul Hess and multiple observers

Date of Submission: 2003

Submitted by: Mike Fialkovich, *Paul Hess*

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

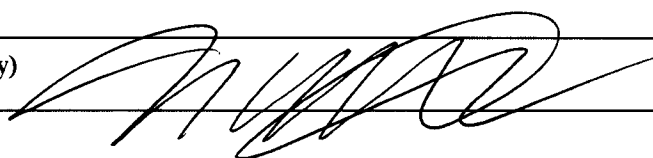
Specimen: No

Recording: ~~Yes~~ *NO*

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
G. Armistead		X						
D. Heathcote		X						
P. Guris		X						
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer		X						
R. Leberman		X						
M. Sharp		X						
TOTALS		5	1					
DECISION		X						

Comments: *6/0*

Signature (Secretary)



Date: *2/20/05*