

# Trip to photograph pelagic birds combines two loves

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I like to take pictures of birds, and I like the ocean. So, what could be a better combination than a trip out into the Atlantic on a pleasant day to see seabirds? Pelagic birds spend most of their lives at sea away from land. Ebird says:

Examples of pelagic birds include albatross, petrels, shearwaters, storm-petrels, skuas, jaegers, tropicbirds, and certain terns. Birders and scientists often know much less about the pelagic birds in their region than other species, meaning there are still lots of exciting things to discover. Scientists don't even know what species occur in many places because no one has ever searched in those areas. (<https://ebird.org/caribbean/news/pelagic-birding-with-ebird-caribbean>)

Closest to the Carolinas, the Pattenon Seabirding trips are the gold standard. Brian Pattenon has been running trips for more than twenty years out of Cape Hatteras. His boat is designed to accommodate birders and nature photographers in unpredictable waters, where he ranges 20-30 miles out to where the Continental Shelf drops off, the Atlantic becomes 1000 feet deep, and the Gulfstream brings warm waters and the birds who feed in them.

I signed up for a trip in mid-May, hoping to jump-start my summer. The website made it clear there was no way to predict the weather or the state of the ocean regardless of what it looked like ashore. So I overpacked, drove eight hours from Asheville to Cape Hatteras. I



*Pelagic Birds Hatteras*

was so nervous the night before our 5:15 a.m. start that I only slept about an hour.

It had been quite windy the night before, but the morning was clear except for a few wispy clouds. It was windy and sunny. But as we motored out of the harbor and into the Pamlico Sound things began to get choppy. Once we got to open ocean, conditions got rougher still and we were going through, over or around 8-foot waves. I had prepared to use my new-ish 500PF f/5.6 lens on this trip. No monopods or tripods were allowed for safety reasons, and this 500PF lens is quite usable without support. What I discovered is that photographers on a trip like this need to master a complex physics problem — how to maintain focus on a moving bird on a boat moving in three planes. I imagine it's sort of like bull riding with a camera.

However, every so often it was possible to get a decent shot of a bird. Easiest were birds in flight because they were usually soaring and I could track them unless they disappeared on the other side of the boat. It was fascinating to begin to understand how these seabirds move. When they weren't up above the ship checking out the food source, they didn't ride thermals like the raptors over land. They used air currents to slide just above the waves or in the trough below the crest of a wave.

The Seabirding crew does a wonderful job of spotting and identifying birds, but it was easy to lose track between trying to keep my footing, the unfamiliar field marks and characteristics, and managing the camera.

On this particular trip, in addition to the regular crew one spotter was Hadoram Shirihai, a highly-respected Israeli ornithologist and author who was out for photos of his latest subject, the black-capped petrel. I'm sure he did much better than I. He was glued to the boat's rail, camera in hand and dialed in almost the whole trip.



*Great Shearwater 1/2500 f/6.3 500mm ISO 1600*



*Storm Petrel 1/4000 f/5.6 500mm ISO 720*



*Great shearwater taking off 1/2500 f/6.3 500mm ISO 800*

Of course, once I got back from this trip, got accustomed to dry and non-moving land and had a chance to look at some of the photos, I knew I had to go back out.

The second trip was mid-June. As it happened, there was also a group of serious birders on this trip, looking to add to their life lists. As a photographer who likes to shoot birds, I was happy to learn from them and to share the group e-bird list, but I'm more focused on getting interesting photographs that convey some of the fascinating behaviors and attributes of the birds I see.

In some respects, this trip was less productive than the first even though the conditions were much easier. A couple of the more photographic birds appeared on the opposite side of the boat and I could see but not shoot them. The Wilson's storm-petrels weren't as close to the boat as they had been on the previous trip. I flat missed a few of the birds I had hoped to get another chance to photograph. One reason is that I decided to try a circular polarizing filter. I believe that when I used the filter properly, it made for better images, but between getting the hang of the filter and wrestling with tinted glasses that didn't play nicely with my viewfinder, I struggled at times.

Overall, though, I came away from both trips feeling that a nature photographer who likes the sea couldn't do better than to spend



*Pomarine Jaeger (dark morph) 1/4000 f/5.6 500mm ISO 320*

10-11 hours out of the sight of land. It's impossible to predict what will show up on any given trip. A trip the day after one I took saw two different kinds of whales! The experience has challenged me to improve as a photographer, both with respect to my equipment and my knowledge of the subject. I just ordered a couple of books on seabird identification and behavior, and I'll take my gear to the Outer Banks to practice capturing shorebirds with the filter. Also, the ferries from Hatteras to Ocracoke are another practice location offshore.

I'm on the wait list for a trip in July and signed up for one in late October. In other words, I'm hooked.

Many thanks to the wonderful folks at Seabirding (<https://pattenon.com/about-seabirding/>) and especially Kate Sutherland, ace bird and wildlife identifier. I hope to become a regular on the Stormy Petrel II.

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*Pomarine Jaeger 1/4000 f/5.6 500mm ISO 220*