

EVIDENCE OF BAND-RUMPED STORM PETRELS (*OCEANODROMA CASTRO*)

## OFF THE ALABAMA COAST

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I was called to the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida in Pensacola on 3 May 1997. They had received eight storm petrels that morning and wanted help in identifying and releasing the birds. In the early morning of that day, a strong cold front had passed through, with heavy thunderstorms, rain, and high winds. The birds had been brought to the sanctuary by a fisherman from Orange Beach (Baldwin County), Alabama. He said that the birds had landed on his boat, wet and exhausted. The exact position of the boat was not given. After a few hours at the sanctuary, they had become active. Upon examining the birds in hand, I took them to the shore of Bayou Grande in Pensacola, Florida. Six of the eight flew readily from my hand and headed toward the Gulf of Mexico. One bird flew, but was too weak to stay aloft. The last bird was too weak to fly at all. I returned the two birds to the sanctuary, but they died.

On examination in hand, the birds were easily separated from Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*). The ends of the tails were squarish, slightly concave, not deeply forked. The white band across the rump was continuous, not narrowly divided by dusky coverts. The white band extended down onto the flanks and was visible on sitting birds. Differentiation from Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) by plumage is more

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difficult. The ends of the tails of Wilson's appear more squarish or sometimes slightly convex rounded. The white bands on the rumps of Wilson's are slightly more elongated toward the tips of the tails than the even width of the Band-rumped. The white band extends to the flanks in both species. Wilson's may be a lighter shade, more brownish-black, than the Band-rumped.

Although these birds qualified as Band-rumped on all these points, each is judgmental. The telling point was the color of the feet. Wilson's has yellow webbing between the toes, visible even in flight at close range. The observed birds had black webbing.

Imhof (1962) noted that Wilson's Storm-Petrel was rather common off our Atlantic Coast states from June to September, but he lists only one occurrence in Alabama. On 27 August 1946, he saw 10 birds close to shore at Ft. Morgan flying into Mobile Bay.

Weston (1965) considered Wilson's Storm-Petrel to be a regular but rare summer visitant off northwest Florida. It is not clear how many records he had. It was previously considered a great rarity anywhere in the Gulf of Mexico, and Howell (1932) cited Weston's record of three birds on 5 July 1926 as one of the few instances ever known. Duncan (1988) updated Weston's work and stated that there were no records since 1965. Lofton (1987) reported sighting several unidentified storm-petrels among large numbers of gannets, somewhere off Bay or Gulf County, Florida, on 28 March 1984.



There have been several reported sightings of Wilson's Storm-Petrel off northwest Florida since 1988. These include 30 birds, 80.5 km (50 mi) off Pensacola on 27-28 May 1989, observed by Kenny Wright (Imhof 1989), 10 birds, 128.8-161 km (80-100 mi) south of Pensacola on 30 June-1 July 1989 by Kenny Wright (Imhof 1989), one bird 16.1 km (10 mi) south of Destin on 5 July 1992 by Phil Tetlow (Robert Duncan personal comm.), and 4 birds 41.9 km (26 mi) off Pensacola on 27 May 1991 by Kenny Wright and James Pfeiffer (Owen Fang personal comm.).

Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) indicated Wilson's Storm-Petrel was considered fairly common off both coasts of Florida, but there were few verifiable specimens, and none from the Gulf of Mexico.

Neither Imhof nor Weston mention Band-rumped Storm-Petrel. Joyce Baxter found one verified specimen on Pensacola Beach on 20 August 1969 (Duncan 1988). Robertson and Woolfenden report three verified specimens: one from Gulf County in 1958, one from Pinellas County in 1977, and the specimen previously reported in Duncan. On 31 May 1993, a bird found 32.3 km (20 mi) south of Pensacola by Ricky Smith was taken to the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida, where it died. It was subsequently discovered and identified by Robert A. Duncan on 30 September and later donated to the Archibold Biological Station.

Eight Band-rumped Storm-Petrels were seen 99.8-144.9 km (62-90 mi) offshore on 15 June 1996 by Jackson, Byrne, and others (Purrrington 1996). This is a new state record, pending acceptance by the Alabama Bird

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Records Committee. Also seen were 10 Wilson's and 4 Leach's Storm-Petrels 68-90 miles offshore (Jackson, Garmon, m.obs.).

A more recent pelagic trip on 24 May 1997 found 15 Band-rumped Storm-Petrels, 4 Wilson's Storm-Petrels, and 2 Leach's Storm-Petrels 93.4 km (58 mi) south of Ft. Morgan, (Duncan, Pers. comm.). Another trip led by Chris Dorgan on 28 June 1997 found 8 Band-rumped Storm-Petrels, 4 Wilson's Storm-Petrels, and 1 Leach's Storm-Petrel further offshore.

On 19 June 1997, a fisherman brought a Leach's Storm-Petrel to the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida in Pensacola. I identified it and released it that afternoon. A Band-rumped Storm-Petrel was noted in the Sanctuary on 20 July 1997 after Hurricane Danny. It was too emaciated and exhausted to recover.

Additional evidence of pelagic birds in the Gulf of Mexico was found in Texas records. Trips departing from Port O'Connor on 28 June 1987 found over 20 Band-rumped Storm-Petrels and 1 Leach's Storm-Petrel and on July 26, 1997 found 25 Band-rumped Storm-Petrels and 2 Leach's Storm-Petrels. Neither trip found Wilson's Storm-Petrels (Texas RBA Reports, Houston Audubon Society). Peak and Elwonger (1996) stated that Band-rumped Storm-Petrel is the most common bird in May, June, and July over continental slope areas in the western Gulf, and probably off Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi as well. Leach's is present and seen regularly, but in smaller numbers. The distribution of Wilson's remains a mystery.



## CONCLUSION

The new AOS Field Checklist of Alabama Birds includes Wilson's Storm-Petrel and Leach's Storm-Petrel, but not Band-rumped Storm-Petrel. Based upon the above information, Alabama birders should consider Band-rumped Storm-Petrel to be, at least, equally likely in state waters. Given the similar appearance of Band-rumped and Wilson's, birders who expect only Wilson's are likely to see only Wilson's. It would be interesting to review the documentation for records of Wilson's sightings in this area to determine if some may have been prejudiced by such expectations. Each of the three species has a very different and distinctive flight pattern, described in the National Geographic Field Guide (1997). Learning those patterns may be the most important way that birders can identify these species in the field.

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