



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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Eight Dollar Albatrosses

Birders are nuts. I know because I dragged my sorry hide out of bed at 4:30 am a recent Friday morning, drove with my homie and fellow bird geek James to Bodega Bay, forked over \$185 in hard-earned cash, and whilst it was still dark out boarded a boat with forty strangers to bounce about the choppy ocean for ten hours gawking at seagulls.

Our excuse for being at sea was pelagic birding - bobbing on the open ocean looking for seabirds that rarely or never come to shore. It's like birding on land, but wetter and bouncier and more expensive. I reminded James that if we saw 185 gulls, that works out to only \$1 a gull. Fortunately, the trip was well worth the money – the cost per gull was only about a quarter. And no one on our boat puked. Bonus!

Our destination was Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary (cordellbank.noaa.gov), a near-surface bank within the 526 square mile ocean sanctuary off Bodega and Point Reyes, famous for upwelling of nutrient-rich deep ocean water that draws numerous marine mammals, seabirds and fishes. Our trip was with Shearwater Journeys (www.shearwaterjourneys.com), seabirding specialists who lead trips out of Bodega Bay and Monterey year-round.

Pelagic birding is weird. There was a "chummer" whose job was to toss popcorn off the stern (that's the back – I was paying attention) of the boat, attracting a frenzied swarm of common gulls behind our boat. Clever - this lured rarer birds to the feeding frenzy. There were expert guides on board, which was good because they could tell you exactly what species you just missed seeing on the other side of the boat. Much of the day consisted of trying to identify small disappearing specks through your bouncing binoculars as a distant nondescript seabird disappeared behind a wave.

Now I'm not a morning person and ten consecutive hours of briny birding was brutal (but not as debilitating as the ten straight hours of *Planet of the Apes* movies I once endured, but that's another column). However, the payoff for my nautical suffering was sublime - I was awed by dozens of majestic black-footed albatrosses with six foot wingspans, and marveled at stately South Polar skuas that circled the boat. I also encountered ten new bird species. Hundreds of shearwaters, fulmars and jaegers dipped and soared around us, and I got good looks at a fork-tailed storm-petrel, some red phalaropes, and half a dozen rhinoceros auklets. The breaching humpback whales and Dall's porpoises surfing in our bow wake weren't too much of a bummer either.

Some quick math revealed that viewing the northern fulmars only cost me about 46¢ per bird. The pomarine jaeger sightings ran about \$9.74 each compared to \$62 per skua, a real steal considering they are the avian pirates of the ocean. Jaegers and skuas make their living strong-arming other seabirds into coughing up the fish they have caught.

Black-footed albatrosses spend much of their life on the wing, scooping flying fish eggs, squid, and fish from the ocean surface, coming to land only when they nest. They spend two years building nests, dancing, and courting with prospective mates to build trust - then mate for life.

Only about 60,000 nesting pairs of black-footed albatrosses survive and thousands are killed each year by long-line fisheries. The Center for Biological Diversity is seeking protection for this albatross under the Endangered Species Act. Albatrosses are also vulnerable to oil and ingestion of floating plastics. Nineteen of the world's 21 albatross species are threatened with extinction.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.