

Birding Aboard “SeaBC” Has Sailors Reporting Unusual Birds



St. Augustine, FL (August 4, 2015) — Word is getting out among sailors worldwide to help report back on the birds they see at sea—and they are spotting some unusual birds, from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean to the Arctic’s Northwest Passage.

The “SeaBC” is a citizen science project coordinated by long-distance birdwatching sailors from around the world (www.birdingaboard.org). Reports are contributed to Cornell University’s eBird database (www.ebird.org), so boaters’ sightings become a resource for scientists and conservationists worldwide. Participation is designed to be simple for non-birders juggling navigation and boat-handling. They are simply asked to photograph any birds seen at least two miles from shore, followed by a snapshot of their navigation display’s coordinates if their camera is not geo-tagged.

“The reports and photographs that are starting to come in are phenomenal,” says founder Diana Doyle. “Inexpensive portable zoom cameras let scientists tap into the sightings of recreational boats as they transit seldom-birded waters. They can be our eyes on the water.”

Because there is so little coverage of pelagic areas, the odds are high for a “birder aboard” to contribute a notable sighting. Here are a few examples:

- Sailing vessel *s/v Aventura IV*, with the Blue Planet Odyssey through the Northwest Passage, photographed a rare white morph Gyrfalcon cliff-nesting on an island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago in Nunavut. Their sighting adds to a lone 1999 historical eBird report of a Gyrfalcon at the same location.
- A 24-year-old, who crossed the Atlantic with his father on *s/v Themis* as part of the Atlantic Odyssey fleet, captured stunning photographs of a Trindade Petrel about 1,000 miles east of Martinique. A Trindade Petrel also was reported independently by *s/v Joyant* about 900 miles east of Antigua. Trindade Petrel is a recently split species, considered vulnerable with uncertain global population and range.
- Two homeschooled children, ages 10 and 11, logged all the birds they saw during their two-week transatlantic, scoring a Red-billed Tropicbird and Masked Booby closer to Cape Verdes than their expected stronghold in the Caribbean.
- In that same fleet, *s/v Gemme* and *s/v Fleur de Sel* documented flocks of Cattle Egrets in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, over a thousand miles from Africa or South America. The Cattle Egret has had one of the most wide-reaching and rapid expansions from its native range in Africa, spreading northward through South and North America since first sighted in Guiana in 1877. They are presumed to have flown across the Atlantic Ocean, given that immature Cattle Egrets will disperse up to 3,100 miles from their breeding area. So Lanzarote to Martinique (the Atlantic Odyssey’s passage) is just a jump across the pond!
- Circumnavigator Ellen Massey Leonard collected photos from her and her husband’s round-the-world passage on 38-foot *s/v Heretic*, contributing noon positions for notable sightings such as Cape Petrel further north than expected in the Indian Ocean, a Brown Noddy hitchhiker off the South African coast, and a Pomarine Jaeger near St. Paul Rocks in the central equatorial Atlantic Ocean.
- Birding Aboard Advisor and U.K. marine conservationist Colin Speedie on *s/v Pelerin* sailed through the balmy Lesser Antilles, only to spot several notable birds common to him from his northern home port! These included Great Skua, Pomarine and Parasitic Jaeger, and Cory’s Shearwater.

Although the majority of SeaBC reports are not flagged as eBird rarities, the regular sightings hold equal value. Because boaters pass by inaccessible island nesting sites, many reports have notably high counts of

common species. Reports of tropicbirds, boobies, noddies, gulls, terns, auks, puffins, fulmars— along with photographs of difficult-to-identify shearwaters and albatrosses—make up the bulk of the Birding Aboard project. These include reports such as Black-footed Albatrosses off the Alaska coast, summer breeding flocks of Dovekies in Arctic waters, Iceland Gulls in winter off New England, migrating Phalaropes off Newfoundland, Yellow-nosed Albatross off South Africa, Cory's Shearwater off Morocco, and Fea's Petrel off Cape Verdes. All these reports help fill in distribution and abundance data in under-birded areas.

There are also reports of hitchhiking land birds, such as Bobolink, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Barn Swallow, Mangrove Swallow, Caribbean Martin, Northern Flicker, and Blackpoll Warbler. These sightings reinforce recent tracking evidence that tiny songbirds are able to migrate long distances over the ocean and are not all “storm waifs.”

A handful of organized pelagic birding trips out of a few select ports can't compete with the potential coverage of thousands of coast-running and ocean-crossing private boats. Michael Schrimpf, eBird reviewer for pelagic reports who confirms the more difficult SeaBC identifications, says of the project: “The response we've gotten from boaters is phenomenal—it's great to get reports from spots on the map with very low coverage.” When asked about SeaBC's use of photographs, he added: “The photographs are invaluable. Most importantly, they let us assist in identifying the bird. The main goal of these photos is documentation—folks shouldn't worry about getting a ‘professional-looking’ picture.”

Going forward, the project is anticipating exciting reports from Blue Planet Odyssey vessels sailing to Tokelau and Vanuatu, another season of attempts through the Arctic's Northwest Passage, a sailboat cruising the Scandinavian Arctic, and OceansWatch Donna Lange's solo circumnavigation. And of course there will be even more sightings from the rest of us boaters, just enjoying the wildlife out on the water.

The SeaBC is a Clean Wake Project of the Seven Seas Cruising Association, an Environmental Programme of the Ocean Cruising Club, and a Project of the Blue Planet Odyssey. For further media information, including high-resolution images, contact Diana Doyle, diana@birdingaboard.org.

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The following images are available at: <http://tinyurl.com/SeaBCAug2015>

Caption (Photo 1): Tropicbirds are commonly reported to the Birding Aboard project, perhaps because they are so elegant and have a habit of circling the mast. Photo ©Ellen Massey Leonard.

Caption (Photo 2): A striking capture of a fast-flying ocean bird, a Trindade Petrel at home a thousand miles from shore. Photo ©Michael Sammer.

Caption (Photo 3): Woodpeckers at sea, for the second season in a row, Northern Flicker reported 20 to 60 miles off the mid-Atlantic coast of the U.S. Photo ©LeAnn Marchman.

Caption (Photo 4): A rare white Gyrfalcon spotted among the cliffs and icebergs of the Northwest Passage. Photo ©Doina Cornell.

Caption (Photo 5): A tiny Blackpoll Warbler, a migrant between Canada and South America, rests in the cockpit of s/v Cinderella about 20 miles off the Florida coast. Photo ©Jaye Lunsford.

Caption (Photo 6): A Brown Noddy claims a radome as its perch halfway between Ascension Island and Barbados. Photo ©Ellen Massey Leonard