

LOUISIANA BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

REPORT FORM

English and Scientific names: Great Shearwater, *Ardenna gravis*

Number: Conservatively counted 10 individuals during 5 hours, though obviously when dealing with moving birds and a moving boat, certainty about the exact count impossible. We did our best not to overcount.

Location: Pelagic waters south from East Bay to Mississippi Canyon, then SE to about 70 miles sse of SW Pass, then return.

Reporting observer and city/state address

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Other observer(s) with: Paul Conover, Lynn Hathaway, Marybeth Lima, Mac Myers, Van Remsen

Original Observers: n/a

This sighting: 09/09/2023, various locations in checklists during pelagic trip out of Venice, La. See checklists.

Details: See <https://ebird.org/checklist/S149555313>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S149555420>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S149555787>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S149555970>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S149556087>, which include many additional photos.



Segment 3



Segment 4





Segment 6



Segment 6



Segment 7

Photos by DPM.

Media: Eagle Optics 10x50. Canon R6, 100-400 F5-6.8 lens.

Discussion: (*From checklist account Segment 2*): The six of us—Paul Conover, Lynn Hathaway, Marybeth Lima, David Muth, Mac Myers and Van Remsen-- began the pelagic trip out of Venice Marina departing on-time at 0600 on the incredibly comfortable Genesis, Calcutta Gold Fishing Charter's 42' tri-hull catamaran, with Captain Josh Edwards and Captain Jace Oulliber as crew. We proceeded downriver in darkness at about 50 mph, with some of us dozing in the bean bags. From Head of Passes in the predawn light we entered East Bay via SW Pass and struck straight south to the open Gulf and continued on a more or less due south course. We crossed a narrow band of greenish brown water, which became gradually greener and then deep blue within 10 miles beyond the South Pass Jetties. We encountered no color breaks, which we were told has been the situation all summer with near record low water in the river. We were in blue water when the sun rose, and began the first Ebird list around 0700 h. (JVR). Our route took us past where a Whale Shark had been seen the previous day, but no luck for us on that score.

Thereafter we went south through featureless blue water with no rip lines or color changes. There were only occasional tiny scatters of sargassum, occasionally forming brief lines with little on the surface for birds to perch upon. We encountered no rip lines. There were occasional flying fish and man-o-wars, but numbers pretty low. Sargassum was thin and mostly submerged. We did follow one more or less defined line of sub-surface sargassum, where we had two BRTE. We also found one patch with a school of dolphinfish, which we were told have been scarce the last few years because of lack of structure.

With no structure to explore we headed to various drilling rigs and platforms (from Hess Gulfstar {WhoDat} on the west to Black Hornet Drill Ship and BP Thunderstorm on the east). We encountered a few moving Sooty Terns, with both adults and immatures, quite vocal. Despite the lack of visible structure or changes in the water, we successfully found birds by heading to distant soaring MAFR and SOTE, which often were above schools of bonita, blackfin and yellow-fin tuna attacking bait near the surface. In addition to numbers of SOTE, all of these areas had unprecedented numbers of shearwaters, led by COSH, then AUSH, and finally a scattering GRSH. The lack of wind may have been why these shearwaters were often loafing in groups on the water ranging two or three to up to 25 mixed shearwaters, strung out or concentrated, with SOTE overhead, and occasionally sitting on the water themselves! But the birds were generally quite active, taking off to relocate and feed when fish frenzies erupted on the surface. Weak winds meant that some of the flight-style identification marks for shearwaters did not apply. We chummed three of these groups of shearwaters, but no storm-petrels appeared, and no gulls were about. The chum seemed to be ignored.

On three occasions we encountered sperm whales. These included two very close photographed individuals at 28.259296 x -88.962454 around 0800 h in about 5,000', and at 28'35.127 x -88'45.379 around 1400h, 19 miles out in about 3,000' in blue water. We encountered what appeared to be two

loosely mixing pods of Pantropical Spotted Dolphins, estimated about 60 total, in the canyon in waters deeper than 5,000' at 28°14.622 x -88°57.225 around 1000 h. At this location we could see 1 or possibly 2 distant Sperm Whales we did not approach or photograph.

Air temperature was about 90 all day, with a thin scatter of clouds. Winds were northerly, light, no more than 5-10 mph. Water temperature was reported as 93 degrees!

The route was south to 5,000' in the Mississippi Canyon, then mostly SSE to about 6,000 feet depth and nearly 70 miles from South Pass. It appeared we were now on the edge of the Loop Current. We then headed north to South Pass through the same featureless color change. We lingered at South Pass jetties to look at loafing birds, then went rapidly back to Venice Marina. We were on the road home by 1630 h. Estimated total straight-line mileage in blue water about 150 miles. The boat cruised comfortably in those seas at 40 mph, and got up to 60 mph chasing jaegers. There was little or no spray.

The first large Sperm Whale (35-40) was encountered during this leg. It was very co-operative, stayed on surface blowing and swimming for several minutes. Photos to INaturalist.

May the LBRC have permission to display in whole or in part this report and accompanying photos on the LOS-LBRC website and LBRC Facebook page? Yes

If yes, may we include your name with the report? Yes

David P. Muth