

Philadelphia Larus

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Autumn 1999

Why I Love Pelagics

by Paul A. Guris

In April 1999 I gave a program for the DVOC on one of my favorite topics: seabirds. More specifically, the program was on tubenoses. I covered the birds seen along the East Coast of North America, with a few of the rarities to keep people thinking. When asked to write up something for *Larus*, I thought about summarizing the ID points but that seemed so dry. Besides, the latest edition of the *National Geographic Guide* covers the separation of the pterodroma petrels quite well. No, I wanted to do something different.

I thought about it for a long time. I flipped through field guides, picture books, and magazines to find some inspiration. I drank beer ... a lot of beer ... to increase the creative output of my brain. All I did was increase the not-so-creative output of my bladder. (Author's Note: I still believe the consumption of beer to kindle one's creativity is a sound theory. I continue to live under this premise in the event that I am asked to write something else one day. "Be prepared," and all that stuff.)

Finally, my wife Anita turned to me and asked, "Well, why don't you just write about a bunch of the things you've seen happen on your trips?" This vague strategy produced a subtle prodding in my brain. I quickly fleshed it out into a more mature literary framework. My brain honed and refined the idea, and I said "Hey! I could write about a bunch of the things I've seen happen on my trips!" Anita looked at me, dumbfounded, obviously amazed at my idea. Her rolling eyes could only have meant that she was in awe of my raw display of brain power.

These are just some of the days I love to recount. When I look at the number of pelagic trips I've taken, and the number of times I've gone out looking at songbirds, the adrenaline ratio is much higher at sea. Surprises occur more often and many of the birds are rarely seen from land. After reading a few of these accounts, maybe you'll realize why I keep going back.

FROM CHUM(P) TO CHAMP IN ONE EASY SPECIES

Back in the late 80's and early 90's, I used to organize pelagics just so I could get out there. Half the time I didn't even get a free trip out of it. Perhaps because I never made a dime off these trips, I ran them under the name Para-pelagic Tours. Or perhaps it was because my sense of humor is strongly influenced by Monty Python's Flying Circus. Either way, in August 1993 I arranged a trip on a boat in Cape May called the Morning Star, gathered



Intrepid Alan Brady

By Jane Henderson

I met Alan Brady for the first time in late October of 1985, appropriately enough, on the deck of Miss Barnegat Light. It was 11 o'clock PM, and Lynn Jackson and I had arrived for a trip out to Hudson Canyon to find some pelagic birds. It was our first such outing. We had been advised to get on the boat early in order to stow ourselves and our gear before departure time, which was to be 2:00 AM.

Alan checked us in, and then told us that there were still plenty of places for us to unroll our sleeping bags and get tucked in. On the upper deck we discovered what sleeping opportunities were available. I was surprised to find that the deck was almost completely covered with people in sleeping bags, some already snoring. I crawled into an unoccupied spot under a bench. I don't think I slept at all. At daybreak, though, Alan and others were up and alert. I heard one person comment that she'd never had such a good night's sleep.

I have had some experience with pelagic birding since then, so I know better now what to expect. But on that day I was much impressed with the fortitude of Alan and the others. So impressed that a few years later, in an article I wrote about pelagic birding for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, I referred to Alan as "intrepid Alan Brady."

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Fall and Winter Programs

October 7 - **The Wind Birds** – Speaker: Phil Moylan, professional nature photographer, whose photos have appeared in many noteworthy publications including National Wildlife Federation and National Geographic Magazines and books. Mr. Moylan's program will emphasize the shorebirds of the Mid Atlantic states and will include anecdotal interludes interspersed within a formal presentation of the birds' plumages, habits and habitats.

October 21 - **Tempest Out of the Teacup: The Functional Ecology of Red-necked Phalaropes** - Speaker: Margaret Rubega, Assistant Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. The interaction of form and function in phalaropes and their fascinating array of behavioral and physical characteristics which have evolved in response to the demands of living and feeding in an aquatic environment.

November 4 - **Members' Slide Contest** – Members submit their best slides in competition for prizes in the categories of - Birds – Natural Landscapes – General Biology - Birders in Action and at Play.

November 18 - **Annual Banquet - Owls of North America** – Speaker: Julio de la Torre

December 2 – **Living on the Wind: The World of Migratory Birds** – Speaker: Scott Weidensaul Join our naturalist and author on an exploration of how and why birds migrate, and the conservation challenges that face them, based on his new book, "Living on the Wind". The program ranges from the doorstep of the Aleutians and the frozen edge of Hudson Bay through the rainforests of Central and South America to the grassy pampas of Argentina, where hawks and shorebirds gather in multitudes.

December 16 – **A Vast Wilderness, A Tiny Bird** – Speakers: Clay and Pat Sutton The Suttons, long-time DVOG members, present a program of their private tour with Wilderness Birding Adventures to Alaska's remote Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. On an eleven-day wilderness float trip, they were surrounded by such avian goodies as Arctic Warbler, Yellow Wagtail, Smith's Longspur, Yellow-billed Loon and Arctic Tern, as well as nesting shorebirds, jaegers, and ptarmigan. They will also share their adventures with the many arctic mammals and a special thrill of finding the first ever confirmed nest of Siberian Tit for Alaska and the United States.

The Quest for Bicknell's Thrush: Field Report

by Adrian Binns

Between June 4th and 6th, 1999, I had the good fortune to lead a wonderful group of 16 participants, including top lepidopterist Bill Murphy and botanist Rick Mellon, on a field trip to the breeding grounds of Bicknell's Thrush in the Adirondacks. A trip that had been billed "Bicknell's and Boreal Species" soon turned into "Bicknell's and Butterflies," as Spruce Grouse, Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers proved to be elusive, and 27 species of butterflies cooperated spectacularly.

We began in the Lake Placid area, where we visited areas of mixed deciduous and evergreen woods with pockets of boreal habitat in the lower elevations along Floodwood Road. Among the 11 species of warblers seen or heard, including one Canada and several Black-throated Greens, the most numerous were Blackburnians. The most memorable sound was that of the Olive-sided Flycatcher's last two notes of its *quick-three-beers* call. It wasn't long before we located bird at the top of a dead tree. A pair of Evening Grosbeaks at a feeder rounded out the day.

Bicknell's Thrush, at this time of the year, sings only in the pre-dawn hours and at dusk. Sometimes as birders, we experience a magical moment in the field: few things could top the dawn chorus at 4000' in habitat known as *krummholz* (an area of stunted conifers near the treeline) toward the top of Whiteface Mountain at 4:30 A.M..

At 3400' the Swainson's Thrushes that we had heard in the lower elevations had given way to Bicknell's, and as we walked higher through the *krummholz*, having the whole mountain to ourselves, Bicknell's songs were punctuated by White-throated Sparrows' and the explosive song of the Winter Wren.

Once we had reached an elevation of 4300' we found a singing Bicknell's patrolling its territory. It wasn't long before the bird was flying around us and finally showed itself for all to see clearly as the sun rose above the horizon. By 5:45 A.M. all Bicknell's Thrushes were silent. Mission accomplished!

Breakfast was spent keeping an eye on a smoking van. At least we got through breakfast without the van's catching fire. Enough said! Then it was on to Oregon Plains Road in Vermontville where we had Purple Finches, a cooperative family of Gray Jays, a not-so-cooperative Boreal Chickadee, and numerous warblers including Nashvilles. Around the corner was a vast area called Bloomingdale Bog. Here we enjoyed unbelievable views of a calling Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. We also saw Rusty Blackbird, Palm Warbler and the butterfly of the trip, a lifer for all, the Jutta Arctic at the very southern end of its range.

Lunch was quicker on our second trip to McDonald's. After the excitement of the armed bank heist the previous day (that's another story) things had returned to normal. Why McDonald's again? Well, some of us hadn't gotten to see the Harvester butterfly behind the restaurant the day before!

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Guris Pelagics, cont'd

the necessary two dozen people, and was all set.

There are times off NJ when the pelagic species have just plain decided to find another piece of ocean. This is particularly true in the summer and fall when cold fronts can act like tubenose brooms. The wind doesn't even have to blow. There are few things more disheartening on one of those trips than hearing the Captain say, "I don't understand it. There were plenty of birds last week." And so it was that on the heels of a soft, gentle cold front we set sail at 5:00 AM.

The ocean was barren. We even passed through an area where 6 boats were chumming for tuna. By the time we reached Baltimore Canyon, we had racked up an amazing total of about two dozen Wilson's Storm-Petrels and two phalarope sp's. My crew was getting ugly. (Actually, most of them were rather ugly to begin with, but then they started getting mean. But I digress.)

Once at the canyon, we stopped the boat. At my request, the Captain had brought along some shark liver for chum. This stuff is like Haagen Das Godiva Chunk ice cream to a tubenose. Some storm-petrels actually started to show. A Blue Shark scarfed down a few pieces and nudged the boat. And then the call came loud and clear: "What's that white one?" I found out later that two people looked straight up thinking that it must be a tropicbird. That "white one" ended up being the holy grail of East Coast pelagic birds, a White-faced Storm-Petrel. And it was really cute (O.K., Anita?). We followed the bird closely for the next 20 minutes. It did the classic kangaroo act, flying along and slowly dipping its feet in the water so it looked like it was bouncing. It sat down several times and we watched it simply stand back up and rise above the water, without even spreading its wings! Then it would open its wings and go slowly bouncing away. What a show!

I was no longer in fear of being forced to walk the plank. The lack of birds on the return trip didn't matter anymore. We bagged the big one. Oh, yeah. We did happen to see a Bridled Tern sitting on a board on the way back. But who really cared? After all, it was in Delaware waters.

ANITA GETS 600...AND 601...AND 602...

Monterey Bay is quite possibly the best pelagic birding spot in North America. The variety and quantity of birds is wonderful. In October, 1995 I was taking a trip to California with Anita. This was her first trip there. We had a wonderful time and she picked up lifer after lifer. (Well, we had a wonderful time until we got lost in East L.A. due to an inaccurate map...but that's another story.) On the day of our scheduled trip with Debbie Shearwater, Anita was sitting at 597. It looked like 600 was going to be easy. We just needed 3.

The day dawned nicely, and we headed out to sea. We dropped 598, a Pacific Loon, in the first mile or so. (Not literally. This wasn't a collecting trip.) Just a little bit farther we started seeing Rhinoceros Auklets for 599. Anita

started drooling. We headed into a giant pod of Common Dolphins, and seabirds were everywhere. All the shearwaters seemed to be Sooties, but it was just a matter of time. Sure enough, a gorgeous Buller's Shearwater came flying down for number 600. She basked in that for about a minute when the first Pink-footed flew past. The rest of the day was blessed. We saw 6 Flesh-footed Shearwaters, a Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, and several Black-footed Albatrosses. The water was too cold for Black-vented Shearwaters that year, but we found two of them anyway. It was a bit early for Short-tailed, but they found 4 or 5 that day. When we headed back to port, Anita had 13 new lifers.

Lucky 13. Lucky Anita. It was too good a combo to waste. As we took one last look for Thick-billed Murre or Yellow-billed Loon right off the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a small alcid flew directly at the boat. With a graceless plop in the water right near the boat, an Ancient Murrelet became Anita's 14th lifer for the day. Lucky Anita.

LARRY GETS 800...AND...HEY, ISN'T 800 ENOUGH!

Every once in awhile, you get to witness human drama at its finest. You realize that you could not have scripted the events better if you tried. This is the story of a fanatical ABA chase machine who we'll refer to as "Larry", though only because that's his name. Larry stepped onto the Country Girl in Manteo, NC with 799 birds on his ABA life list, but no Herald Petrel. Our mission (whether we wanted it or not) was to find that Herald Petrel.

The day was fine, the seas were calm, the birding was good, and we caught some Dolphin (Mahi-Mahi, not Flipper) for dinner. We had reached the middle of the day doldrums, which are not uncommon on pelagics. Suddenly one of the fishing lines starts running and Brit, our mate, hooks up a small Dolphin. Being good to our participants, he turns to find somebody to reel the fish in. Larry is asked, accepts, and goes about the work of cranking the denizen from the deep into the boat.

As I said earlier, I could not have scripted it better. Larry gets in the fighting chair. He turns the crank once. He turns it twice. He turns it a third time. Suddenly Mary Gustafson's voice erupts through the earpiece of my headset screaming, "HERALD PETREL!!!" And Larry is screwed.

There are few things in this world more cumbersome looking than a man in a fighting chair with a large fishing rod hooked up to a fish and trying to use binoculars to view a lifer between other people. Well, I grab the rod from Larry, Brit grabs the rod from me, and the Herald grabs the show by doing three, count them, three spins around the boat. The bird's plumage looked like velvet and Larry looked like Leonardo DiCaprio in the now famous "King of the World" scene in *Titanic*...except that he's older...and has gray curly hair...and isn't dorky looking like Leonardo. Well, let's just say he looked happy. Another satisfied customer!

SORRY, ANITA

I uttered these words to my wife several years back

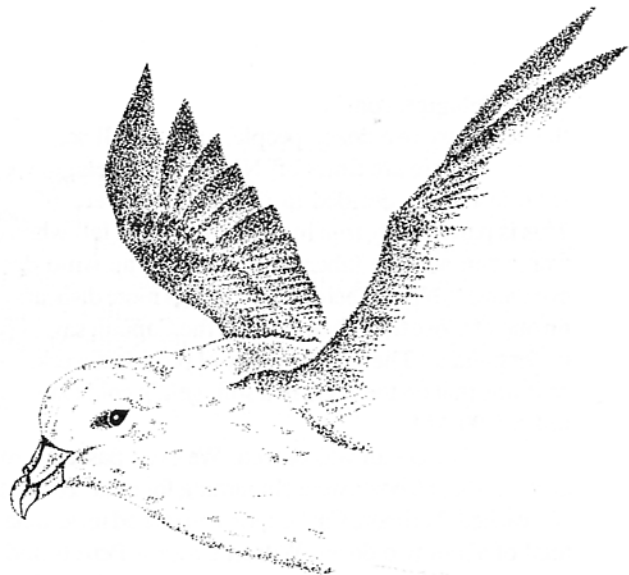
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Bicknell's, Cont'd from Page 2

Then onto the Ferd's Bog area about 80 miles southeast of Lake Placid, still short a few woodpeckers and Mellon's nemesis, the Spruce Grouse. The afternoon was spent searching Brown's Tract without any luck. Dawn the next morning was spent back at Ferd's Bog, a wonderful 100 acre bog surrounded with spruce and tamarack trees. However, all we were able to find was a lone Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and an exquisite Lincoln's Sparrow singing its heart out.

There was more excitement at breakfast when word of the birds we were in search of were actually being seen. Alas, we searched Moose Plains River, Helldiver Pond and several other areas in vain. Just more skirting views of Boreal Chickadees.

We all finished with Alder Flycatcher and Chestnut-sided Warblers singing, and we located a Mourning Warbler that refused to stay within anyone's sight. It was not long before luck was on our side and we found another one that showed well. Our 97th species for the trip, and a great bird to finish with.



Guris Pelagics, Cont'd from Page 3

when we were discussing her potential lifers off North Carolina. The bird was Red-billed Tropicbird, and she wanted one...and she wanted it bad. Unfortunately, this is a tough bird on the East Coast. The only one I had seen was the famous (and confused) bird that spent the summer off Martha's Vineyard back in the 1980's.

And so it was with no expectations that we set sail last spring on our favorite boat, The Country Girl. The day was calm and we racked up a sweet dark-phased Herald. Things were a bit calmer in the early afternoon until Mary Gustafson started yelling, "Tropicbird!" The bird banked and dove, showing us enough detail that I started screaming, "Red-billed!" I wrote the following when I posted the trip report to BirdChat. I'm including it for the benefit of those who never got to read it. (Ok, you caught me. Actually, I'm putting it in to fill space.)

The Captain looked out at a speck in the water,
Should he go on over? He knew that he oughter. (sorry)
And what to our wondering eyes should appear,
But a Red-billed Tropicbird and the boat in high gear!
It lifted on up and soared into the sky,
And all those aboard were saying bye-bye.
But then it looked down and took a great plunge,
It grabbed with its bill and ate something for lunch. (sorry again)
It sat on the water! We went right up to it!!!
One guy tried to focus, but he just couldn't do it!!!!
The bird was so close! It was less than 10 feet!!!
Thank God my wife saw it (I would have been meat!)
Then it finally picked up and it flew out of sight.
And we said to ourselves, "Hey, this doesn't bite."

Yes, Anita, there is a Santa Claus. We really did get within 10' of the bird. Anita was on the front of the boat and bottomed out the close focus of her Zeiss 7x42's. The guy sitting next to her actually couldn't focus on it. I never dreamed that the 7' close focus of my Nikon Venturers would give me an advantage on a pelagic trip. And we've got the picture in our living room to prove it.

Fall Field Trips

Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 4 and 5: Pelagic trip out of Cape May, N.J. on the "Morning Star." 5:00 A.M. - 7:00 P.M.

\$95 per person. Call Armas Hill at 302-529-1876.

Sunday, Sept. 19: Join Ward Dasey for some exciting fall birding at Palmyra. Focus will be on migrating warblers and early sparrows, but anything is possible. Call Ward at 609-953-1658.

Saturday, Oct. 9: Tuckerton for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Great comparison of all races with Frank Windfelder. Call Frank at (215) 673-0240.

Sunday, Nov. 7: Bake Oven Knob for raptors. Golden Eagle and Goshawk. Maybe winter finches. Call Bill & Naomi Murphy (215) 885-2488.

Call Field Trip Chairperson Bill Murphy at 215-885-2488 for additional field trip information.

Brady, cont'd from page 1

Not having a clue who I was, I'm sure, he sent me a Christmas card that year, with a note that said, "Thanks for the plug." The card featured his own gorgeous photo of a Black-browed Albatross. He signed the card "Intrepid Alan." I still have the card.

And Alan's still intrepid. From October 5 to November 8, 1998 he was on what he called a "huge pelagic trip" to the Lost Islands of the South Atlantic aboard the 400 ft. MS Explorer. At a DVOOC meeting shortly after his return he presented a slide show of his fantastic voyage, along with the places he visited and the birds he saw. Alan got three life birds on the trip: Yellow-nosed Albatross, Sooty Albatross and Spectacled Petrel.

The group started out in Tenerife on the Canary Islands. He bunked with Hubert Hall, retired captain of the Bluenose Ferry, in what Alan called "the cheapest cabin" on the ship. He and Hubert were first on the bridge every morning, and stayed on deck all day. Alan said he attended one or two of the indoor lectures that were offered. "The weather must have been bad" on those days, he said, in order for him to have stayed inside.

They stopped at a number of islands including Gough Island, Tristan Island and St. Helena, where Napoleon had been imprisoned. They wound up in the Falklands and South Georgia. Alan had visited the Falklands and South Georgia twice before.

Alan kept a log every day and loaned me a copy of it. In it, along with a daily record of people, places and things, he recorded the latitude and longitude of the birds they saw. His data helps to fill in gaps of what is known about the range and distribution of sea birds in the South Atlantic. He remains in contact with sea birders all over the world.

Alan estimates that he has been to Hudson Canyon 300 times, and always sleeps on the upper deck. He recalls that one night 10 years ago or so, around midnight, he woke up and thought it was snowing. He soon realized that what he was seeing were migrating birds, mostly Blackpoll Warblers. From midnight to 4:00 AM, he said, flocks of birds flew over the boat, probably attracted to the light. He said he checked with bird banders all up and down the Atlantic coast and no one had seen or recorded them. That night he picked up three dead warblers, and turned them over to the Academy. He said they were so fat "they could have flown around the world."

Alan started birding when he was 12 years old. He was a member of the Boy Scouts then, along with Bob Seal, Dave and Herb Cutler, Dale Twining, Charlie Wonderley and the late Trusten Baldwin. The assistant scoutmaster of their troop was Ed Weyl, who took the boys to good birding spots like Pokomoke Swamp and Cobbs Island, Virginia. Later, Alan became a member of the nature staff at Treasure Island on the Delaware River.



Brady, cont'd

Weyl took Alan to a Christmas Count at Cape May. Alan's first trip to that birding Mecca. Alan recalls that when they went to Cape May Court House for dinner at the conclusion of the Count, they gave their list to a "little man with twinkly eyes, sitting in a booth." The man was Witmer Stone. Alan said he meekly suggested that he had seen a pigeon hawk. Stone told him, "We never see pigeon hawks in the winter." Alan still chuckles about that.

Alan grew up in the Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia. As a youngster he birded Cresheim Valley with his friend Tibby Stevenson who lived nearby. He said he used to tie one end of a string to his big toe and dangle the other end out the window. Stevenson would tug on the string at 6:00 AM and the boys would get up and go out birding before school. "We saw all sorts of wonderful things," he said. One winter they found a flock of Common Redpolls in a birch tree.

Alan talked at some length about his early experiences with birding. "You have no idea what it was like then," he said. In 1970-71 a new boat, Miss Barnegat Light, started running trips to Hudson Canyon. Nobody had ever been birding there before. Alan saw his first South Polar Skua and Northern Fulmar on one of those trips. One winter he saw seven Great Skuas and thousands of Wilson's Storm Petrels. "Everything's depleted now," he said sadly, "even on the ocean."

In the 1930's, Alan worked for Pan American on the Yankee Clipper. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and was stationed on the Patuxent River, "the same place where the Kelp Gull is," he said.

Alan told me he "lucked out" when he met Liz, his wife of 53 years. "She lets me do all these wonderful things," he said. Liz is an artist, and works in watercolor, painting mostly landscapes. She sells some of her work, but does most of it for fun. Alan and Liz have two daughters, Susan and Sally, and a son, David, who runs Camera Craft Shop, Inc. in Newtown, PA, now in its 50th year. They have three grandchildren and one great grandson.

Alan told me he's "pushin' 80." He added that he admires former President George Bush's recent parachuting adventure, and quoted Bush's statement, "I just want to show you that old guys can do it too." Alan, it looks like you'll be doing it for some time yet.

The Excellent Adventures of the 1999 - DVOC / NIKON WSB TEAM "THE LAGERHEAD SHRIKES"

by Adrian Binns

A year after a second place finish, and short of our goal of 200 species, we were determined to break that mark. Two solid weeks of scouting gave me reason to believe that Paul Guris, Mike Fritz, Bill Stocku and I could break our previous high count. But of course the "Big Day" would definitely be different. And was it ever....

It had been 364 days since we were last together, and probably for the better, but something during those 24 hours seems to bring out the best in us. And while we were having a great time, the birds were falling into place nicely, as we came out of the north 9 or so hours into the competition with 126 species, a wonderful total that included Long-eared Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Golden-winged Warbler.

A slight detour from last years route produced Upland Sandpiper, American Pipit, Pheasant, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Great Cormorant, which, as it turned out, made all the difference in the winning score. By the time we had reached Cape May State Park at 5:45 PM we had 200 species with many "staked" birds still to come.

With the winds blowing from the east, it was a great day for pelagic birds. Every other team seemed to get their fair share of seabirds, but with "Mr. Pelagic" at the helm, we were not able to persuade him to turn those dots on the horizon into anything countable. One thing is for sure, and that is, one can not get every single bird on the day....

Luck, as always, played a big part. The Hairy Woodpecker that we missed up north, called down south.. a Merlin chased a pigeon through downtown Wildwood.. and somehow someone's eye caught Black Skimmers flying over buildings in Stone Harbor....and to finish with, a Sedge Wren called at 11.05 PM at Jake's Landing. Our 223rd species.

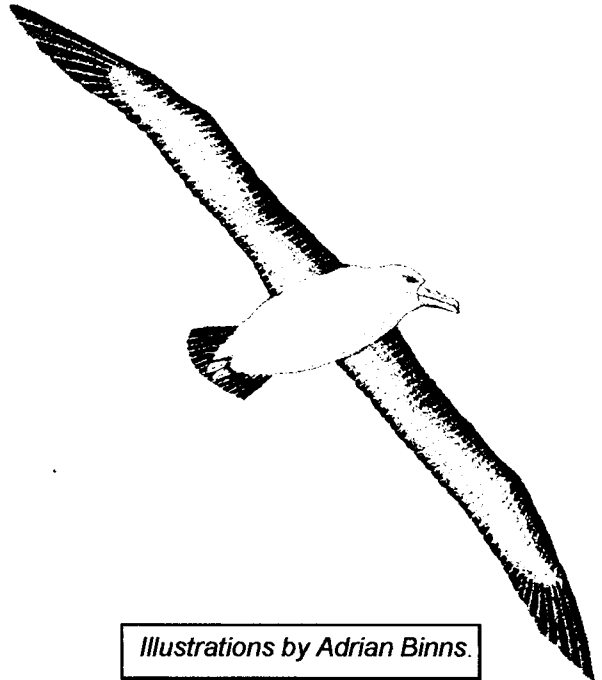
Our thanks go to two organizations, without whom this could not have been possible. Over the last few years we have been sharing scouting information with the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology team. This is reflected in the fact that each year we finish with similar totals. Though we are both determined to better our totals, this year's extra time spent scouting and sharing showed that it benefited both teams, and that there is potential for a large one day count. They finished second with 220 species.

And, finally, thanks go to Nikon for their generosity and continued sponsorship of our team. Jon Allen takes care of all our needs as well as providing us with the finest optics.....thank you Jon and Cornell.

DVOC Website address:
<http://www.acnatsci.org/dvoc>

Militia Hill Hawkwatch 1999

The Militia Hill Hawkwatch at Ft. Washington State Park in Fort Washington, PA will begin operation on September 1, 1999 and continue through the month of October. Volunteer compilers will be on duty on the hawkwatch platform there from 9:00 A.M. until 5:00 P.M. every day. Many DVOC members serve there as volunteer compilers for HMANA, The Hawk Migration Association of North America. Militia Hill can be easily reached from the park entrance on Militia Hill Road near the junction of Bethlehem Pike and Route 73. There is another park entrance on Joshua Road. During the September and October of 1998 a total of 24 Bald Eagles were sighted from the platform, some coming in quite close.



Illustrations by Adrian Binns.

CORRIGENDA

The Spring 1999 *Larus* contained two errors in the note about awards recipients. The correct information is as follows:

Ward Dasey received the Potter Award for compiling the regional report and for his work at Palmyra, NJ.

Phil Street received the Witmer Stone Award for writing about the birds of the Poconos.

Send announcements, pieces to be considered for publication, schedules and other information for *Philadelphia Larus* to:

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