

# Pelagic birding on PEI

BY BRIAN DALZELL

The weather always seems to play a major part in determining the success of outings into the great outdoors, whether you are simply working in the garden or planning a backyard barbecue. It also seems to deteriorate just when a long-planned event arrives.

Such was the case on September 27, the day I had chosen to travel to the Magdalens in search of pelagic birds (pelagic means relating to, occurring or living in the open sea).

Referred to simply as "pelagics" by birders in the know, these birds of the open ocean are right at home on the briny deep and think nothing of spending months at sea, seldom coming to land except to nest. A quick look at the latest edition of the field check list of birds for P.E.I. reveals that at least eight of these pelagics have occurred in Island waters.

One, the Black-browed Albatross, is listed as hypothetical, so that leaves only seven that could be said to occur here with any regularity. These seven are Greater and Sooty Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Leach's and Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Northern Gannet and Black-legged Kittiwake. They range in seasonal status from accidental for the fulmar to very common for the gannet.

Not surprisingly then (except for the gannet), if you want to see these birds, a trip out to sea is usually the only way to go. With this in mind I had planned my trip to the Magdalen Islands. The five-hour crossing would be in P.E.I. waters for at least half the way, so I hoped to be able to shed some more light on the occurrence of these wanderers of the open ocean in this part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

One very obvious fact that I somehow overlooked was that most of the previous records for the Island were a result of storms. That is, the birds were recorded close to shore during or after periods of prevailing on-shore winds of storm force. It is rather difficult to plan a pelagic trip around a storm though, unless you have a direct line to that someone up above. But as I was soon to rediscover, luck still plays a bigger part in birdwatching than any amount of skill or planning.

The ferry to the Magdalens was not scheduled to leave until 2 p.m. that day, so I decided to take my time and do a little birding along the north shore enroute to Souris. Starting about 8 a.m., my first stop was at the mouth of St. Peter's Bay near Greenwich, an area endowed with copious amounts of sand dunes, scrub spruce and heather-like shrubs..

I did notice the wind was blowing quite hard when I got there, but that was just fine, as it made for good birding, there being quite a few small birds feeding along the edge of the woods in the lee of the wind. In short order I found a little group of yellow-rumped warblers, complete with a small entourage of palm warblers, white-crowned sparrows and a single redstart.

The sparrows were doubtless new arrivals from their breeding grounds in Quebec and Labrador, but I couldn't help notice how similar the habitat along the dunes was to that I had previously seen white-crowned sparrows in during a trip to Labrador.

Perhaps they had nested there this summer, perhaps not. I did later find out that fox sparrows (a bird which prefers similar habitat) have been recorded during the breeding season on nearby Blooming Point, which is similar to the Greenwich Point area. It would certainly be worth checking out next year for the Maritimes Breeding Bird Atlas.

However, I digress, so back to the story at hand. My next stop was at