

Beaver Point and it was there that it finally dawned on me that my plans for the day could be in jeopardy. As far as I could see, line after line of rolling breakers were marching into shore. As they got closer, they increased in height, and by the time they crashed ashore I figured they were at least six to eight feet in height. And the wind.

As I drove along the shore, sand and salt spray plastered the car, as it rocked and rolled like a subway car in the gale-force winds. I later found out that the lighthouse at East Point recorded peak winds of 49 knots, or 56 miles per hour, during the height of the gale. It was then that the light came on, when I decided to have a closer look at some of these "seagulls" riding the wind just offshore.

My telescope quickly revealed they were gannets and there were lots of them. They were at least a quarter mile offshore and the distance made them seem like gulls because of their large size.

I watched for about five minutes and counted about 250 as they streamed east in great wheeling circles above the wave crests. I then decided to drive a little farther up the shore to Cable Head in the direction from which they were coming in hopes of getting a closer look.

When I arrived, I parked the car into the wind facing out to sea, and resting my scope on the steering wheel, peered into the teeth of the gale. The gannets were closer to shore here, only about 300 yards, and I could see they were composed about equally of white adult birds and darker-plumaged immature birds of various ages.

I estimated from 25-50 birds were passing by in any given minute, and those were just the ones I could see, there being no way to tell how many hundreds more were too far out to see. Thus, a conservative estimate of their numbers during the two hours I was there would be somewhere in the range of 5,000 birds.

The gannets were not the whole story though, and if I hadn't had to stop and wash the salt off the windshield every two minutes, I might not have noticed the petrels. At first I thought they were black-bellied plovers, being of the right size and shape, and besides, they were too close to shore for petrels. But wait, didn't one of those birds have a white rump!

There were three birds in the first group I noticed and other than note they were petrels, I didn't get a good look at them because they were too close for my scope. It was 15 minutes before the next one came along and this time I got my binoculars on it in time to determine that it was a Leach's Storm-Petrel.

Unlike the gannets, the petrels were fighting their way into the wind heading west along the shore just off the beach, skimming the wavetops as they went. Not being strong fliers, I assumed it was all they could manage just to maintain their position along the beach. In fact, one almost hit my car several minutes later as it struggled along the beach trying to get out to sea.

Over the next two hours I ran up a total of 15 petrels, and all the ones I got a chance to study well were Leach's, so I felt safe in assuming they were all of that species. And of course if I had not been watching for them, I probably would not have seen the next bird in the pelagic parade.

It shot past just in front of the car no more than six feet over the beach, a small gull with black and white triangles on the wings. A Black-legged Kittiwake! An immature by the plumage, it seemed not to notice its plight, and sailed rapidly on down the beach like a "normal" seagull. Heading east like the gannets, it was quickly lost to sight.

Between cleaning salt off the window, looking at the gannets and checking the beach for petrels, I almost missed the last species in the parade. Like the petrels, they were heading west, but having an easier time of it and were almost as far out as the gannets, maybe 200 yards. There were four