NORTH CAROLINA PELAGIC TOUR

May 29 – June 5, 2017

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After many years of wanting to do a tour to the waters off of North Carolina, Brandon and I and a group of eight others, six from Texas and two from North Carolina, did just that. In fact, we did two Brian Patteson pelagic trips into the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, water that possibly originated off the Texas Coast near Galveston. There were birds, fishes, reptiles, mammals, *Sargassum* seaweed, water boundaries, chum trails, oil slicks, and water temperatures in the high seventies.

However, the tour began far inland near Raleigh as we started our first morning at William B. Umstead State Park where we enjoyed nice looks at Brown-headed Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Pine Warbler, and Summer Tanager. At nearby Crabtree County Park we found the local seed feeder and surrounding pines where we watched Indigo Bunting, American Goldfinch, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Chipping Sparrow, and a late Blackpoll Warbler.

After a taste of birding in the tall trees of the east, we worked our way toward the coast with a pleasant stop for lunch just off of I95. After lunch and before reaching the Virginia coast we entered Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and did not emerge from this aptly named locale until we had seen a surprising number of birds, and seen them well. Our first stop was the Interior Ditch and later Washington Ditch, a structure they claimed was dug with help from George himself. As we walked the many boardwalks in the swamp we were surprised at the number of birds using the swamp for their breeding grounds. We watched Prothonatory, Hooded, Pine, Prairie, and Black-and-White Warblers, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, American Redstart, Gray Catbird, Summer Tanager, and heard a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Great Dismal Swamp NWR turned out to be a wonderful place to bird. On our next tour we plan to spend additional time in the swamp.

After the swamp, it was time for a shower and an easy stroll along the Virginia Beach boardwalk. This was a chance for some fine dining and a leisurely walk as the sun set in the west. In the morning, a few watched the sun rise out of the Atlantic Ocean while others opted to sleep in a bit. We spent a little time working coastal areas in Virginia near our hotel where we found Black Scotor, Red-breasted Merganser, Clapper Rail at our feet, American Oystercatcher in a back bay, Semipalmated Plover, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, White-rumped Sandpiper, Great Black-backed Gull, Sandwich Tern and several skimming Black Skimmers. Finally, it was time to head south and east to the Outer Banks, however, a stop at Stumpy Lake Recreational Area was needed for a restroom break and the Pileated Woodpecker nest cavity with two, easily visible and near ready to fledge young.

Finally, it was off to Cape Hatteras where we would spend the next four nights at the Breakwater Inn just minutes from the harbor where we were to meet Brian Patteson and his able crew the following morning. After a fine seafood dinner we set off to the store in search of goodies to take with us on the pelagic trip, and of course goodies we found. The following morning at 5:15 we arrived at the dock, at 5:30 we boarded the boat and listened to the Captain’s safety spiel, and finally at 5:45 we shoved off from the dock and started ticking birds, many of which we had seen previously. The adult Great Black-backed Gulls looked enormous and rather dapper with their yellow, black, and white attire. After a bumpy ride out to the Gulf Stream we encountered pelagic birds, a nice flock of Audubon’s Shearwaters with a few Cory’s Shearwaters mixed in for comparison, but it was the arrival of a few close at hand Black-capped Petrels and Wilson Storm-Petrels that got the adrenaline going. We would see Black-capped Petrels and Wilson’s Storm Petrels during most of our time in the Gulf Stream. An occasional Band-rumped Storm Petrel flew in for comparison with the numerous Wilsons. We spotted a Bridled Tern on flotsam and a few in flocks flying by along with a few Arctic Terns. As things were slowing down a bit, the boat took a rather abrupt turn to the starboard side and the Captain mentioned a white spot on the horizon that eventually morphed into a juvenile Red-billed Tropicbird, an ABA bird for all and a life bird for most. This turned out to be the one and only tropicbird for the spring tours. We were able to make a close approach and admire the orangish bill, black mask through the eyes, and in the flight we noticed the reduced amount of black in the wingtips,

The day in between the pelagics proved to be a day of rest. We did some light mid-morning birding then some heavy lunching at a nearby deli. The follow morning we repeated our steps, at the dock at 5:15, spiel at 5:30, shoving off at 5:45 and were greeted with a remarkably smooth ride out to the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. Again the Black-capped Petrels, Corys and Audubon’s Shearwaters found our chum and oil slick, however, this time a few Great Shearwaters came to join the fray behind the boat. It was stunning to see Black-capped Petrel and Great Shearwater in our wake so close to each other for so long. The photographers in the group were having a ball. The soon to arrive adult Pomarine Jaeger kept the photographers busy as well. Today a smattering of Leach’s Storm-Petrels joined the Band-rumped and numerous Wilsons. Just as I lay down inside for a brief respite, I heard a ruckus outside the cabin. As I wondered who had gone overboard, I heard through the speaker system, Brown Booby, and sure enough an adult went cruising past the boat. No rest for the weary or the birder on a pelagic trip.

The two boat trips allowed us to view pelagic birds up close but also to see False Killer Whale, Bottlenose Dolphin, Blue Marlin, Sailfish, Dwarf Sperm Whale, Sperm Whale, Pilot Whale, and two species of flying fish. Thanks to Brian, Kate, Steve and others for two great pelagic trips.

After a celebratory dinner of left over pizza and cold beer we packed it in and packed our bags for a late morning departure the following day. Here is where Ed and Barbara would leave us as they were going to spend another day in the area. There was little birding as we drove west for Raleigh, though we did make a lighthouse stop or two where there were birds like American Black Duck and Caspian Tern. People like Ed and Barbara, birds just somehow know the good birding stops. Once in Raleigh, Brian and Marci were dropped off at their new home, while Bob and Carol prepared for their trip to New York. I heard Dede and Bernice caught a flight home the following morning; however with those two travelers they might have spent another few days in North Carolina looking for more birds. After all they and Ed and Barbara had spent several days in Delaware watching the horseshoe crab migration and Red Knot spectacle.