

# The Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross from Somerset to Lincolnshire – a new British bird

*Steve Gantlett and Tony Pym*

At about 2.30pm on Friday 29th June 2007, Hugh Harris found a strange, huge bird wandering around on his driveway at Warren Farm, Brean Down, Somerset. Although close to the beach, the bird was obviously a seabird out of habitat, so he telephoned the local wildlife rescue centre at nearby East Huntspill.

The bird appeared exhausted or sick and Mr Harris easily caught it by hand, picked it up, put it in the boot of his car and took it to the rescue centre. The member of staff of the 'Secret World Wildlife Rescue Centre' who accepted the casualty thought that it was a Fulmar, but was surprised at its size and jokingly remarked that it looked more like an albatross, but at this stage no-one seriously questioned that the bird was not a Fulmar. However, as soon as Pauline Kidner, administrator of the centre, saw the bird, she realised that it was an albatross – and she presumed that it was a Black-browed Albatross.

Next morning at about 9.30am, the local vet, Dick Best, was telephoned, but unfortunately he

was out. A message was left on his answerphone. The bird was checked-over anyway and seemed healthy; it showed no obvious physical reasons for its previous day's landing out of habitat. Its plumage was bright, it seemed a good weight around its sternum, and it seemed relaxed. The rescue centre staff realised that this seabird would be stressed in captivity, might not feed and would suffer body and feather condition the longer it was held, so, as it showed no physical problems, they presumed that it had just been exhausted and they immediately put into action a release plan.

The tide was rising mid afternoon and this seemed the best time to release the bird. This was just over 24 hours since it had been found. It was taken to the top of the cliffs of Brean Down, with the local hovercraft rescue team from Burnham-on-Sea alerted and kindly on standby on the sea below, ready to rescue the bird in case it was not as healthy as it seemed and crash-landed into the sea.

Plate 1. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brean, Somerset, June 2007 (Richard Austin/[www.secretworld.org](http://www.secretworld.org)). The first for Britain and the first of a run of remarkable sightings! This bird is almost certainly a third-year of 26-27 months beyond fledging.





Plates 2-4. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brean, Somerset, June 2007 (Steve Birkenshaw, above, and Richard Austin/[www.secretworld.org](http://www.secretworld.org)). The genus *Thalassarche* consists of up to 11 'mollymawks' - four medium-sized albatrosses (Shy, White-capped, Salvin's and Chatham Islands) and seven smaller albatrosses (Black-browed, Campbell, Atlantic & Indian Yellow-nosed, Buller's, Pacific and Grey-headed). Of these, three (Shy, Black-browed and Atlantic Yellow-nosed) have reached Western Palearctic waters (the first of these in the Red Sea). The snowy-white head, in combination with the long, relatively fine dark bill immediately identifies this bird as one of the yellow-nosed albatrosses, and the restricted amount of black on the underwing confirms this. Immatures of the 'Shy group' also show very little black on the underwing, but have dusky markings around the head and a deeper bill.





Plates 5 & 6. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brean, Somerset, June 2007 (Richard Austin/[www.secretworld.org](http://www.secretworld.org)). The recently split Atlantic and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses are easily told apart as adults (the former sports a grey-washed head), but immatures are less straightforward to separate, with bill pattern being the clincher. In Atlantic, the proximal end of the culmen is rounded, while the base of the culmen stripe is relatively blunt. In Indian, both are narrower and sharply pointed.





Plates 7 & 8. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brean, Somerset, June 2007 (Richard Austin/www.secretworld.org).

After a night in care, the hapless mollymawk was launched off the clifftop to continue its remarkable journey.

The albatross was taken from its box and placed on the grass near the cliff-edge close to the top of the Brean Down steps. It stood and preened for a while, before being encouraged right to the edge. It did not seem to want to launch itself, however, so after about an hour, Simon Kidner, who had handled it throughout its stay, picked it up, which enabled it to stretch its wings. It then felt the lift from the light south-westerly breeze blowing at the time and rose effortlessly into the sky at 5.40pm, and headed out to sea and towards Wales, but was quickly lost to view. The whole event was videoed and photographed (including by invited professional news photographer Richard Austin from Dorset), but it was not witnessed or known about by a single birder!

Next morning (Sunday), the story and photographs were sold to the national newspapers, for publication the following day. But the story was also featured on the local news website, with photographs and video, and local birder James Packer quickly saw them. James immediately told Paul Bowyer, who straightaway posted the information on the Birdforum website and then, at last, the birding world finally became aware of the event; and, of course, birders quickly realised that this was not a Black-browed at all, but Britain's first ever Yellow-nosed Albatross! The wording on the website (and in press with the newspapers) was hastily changed!

#### Derbyshire

The following day (Monday 2nd July) at about 3.00pm, what was surely the same bird (and see Lincolnshire below) was seen at Carsington Water in Derbyshire.

Two casual birdwatchers, Cyril and Shirley Wood, who visit Carsington Water regularly, were in the Millfields carpark at the reservoir when they saw a huge, unfamiliar bird. Evidently, all the Coot moved to one side, and even the Canada Geese moved away from what seemed to be a massive Great Black-backed Gull-type bird, with a huge black bill, which landed on the water only about 80 yards from them. It had a blackish back and wings, a white head, a large black bill and a dark eye. It twice flew a short distance on long, narrow wings and then landed again, keeping close inshore each time. After just 10 minutes, it flew again, but this time it flew low northeast past Millfields Island, where it was lost to view.

They had no idea what the bird was and they spent some time trying to relocate it, but found no further sign of it. One other observer had a brief view of the bird at extreme range (through double glazing!) and described it as resembling a massive Fulmar in jizz. Cyril and Shirley apparently know their common birds, and immediately refuted any suggestion that it might have been a Great Black-backed Gull or a Gannet. They said it was nothing like those species and

they knew it was something really odd. It was not in their bird book and they just put it down as one of life's mysteries... until Cyril opened his newspaper the following morning and saw a picture of exactly what they both agreed they had seen the previous day (especially the black bill shape) – the Yellow-nosed Albatross from Somerset!

They returned to Carsington to report their sighting to surprised recipients of the news, who found it difficult to believe that an albatross would have flown this far inland but, realising that Cyril and Shirley had certainly seen something interesting, asked them for a description.

Carsington Water in landlocked Derbyshire is 133 miles north-northeast of Brean and 52 miles southwest of Manton, Lincolnshire....

#### Lincolnshire

Amazingly, that evening (Monday 2nd July), the same bird was refound at an inland site in Lincolnshire. It was found by fisherman Paul Condon at Manor Farm Fishing Lakes, Manton, near Messingham – some 188 miles northeast overland from Brean, 52 miles from Carsington Water and some 25 miles short of the North Sea.

At about 7.00pm, he noticed a dozen or so gulls mobbing a large seabird swimming on the main 38-acre lake but, as he was there for a night's fishing, he did not investigate any further. He woke early the next morning and the seabird was still present, however, but now it

was quite close to the bank, only a few yards from him, and now being attacked by the resident Mute Swans. It seemed to look rather sick and hunched up as it swam on the lake, and it did not react to the swans, which soon gave up.

Realising that the bird was something very special, and indeed convinced that it was an albatross, Paul took a series of photographs of it. While fishing, Paul was using an aniseed-smelling bait-dropping device which he was casting out into the water, and twice the albatross flew up and landed on it and picked it up, but fortunately it dropped it quickly each time and soon lost interest. It stayed close to the bank for about another hour and then took off and disappeared. At about midday, however, it suddenly flew in again from the back of a large island. It then circled both lakes for a few minutes, as though it was having a last look around, and then it flew off into the distance and did not return.

Paul told Neville Fickling, the manager of the fishery, about the bird, and shared his photographs with him. Neville emailed some of these to the RSPB and, upon their suggestion, he then sent them to the Lincolnshire county bird recorder, Steve Keightley. Had it not been for the photographs taken, this record would probably never have seen the light of day, but again the bird had not been seen or even known about by any birders! Eventually, on 10th July, the photographs were featured on the Lincolnshire Bird Club website.

Plate 9. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, with Greylag Goose *Anser anser*, Manor Farm Fishing Lakes, Messingham, Lincolnshire, 3rd July 2007 (Paul Condon). A bizarre sight indeed!





Plates 10 & 11. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Manor Farm Fishing Lakes, Messingham, Lincolnshire, 3rd July 2007 (Paul Condon).  
Marks on the bill and individual feather patterns clearly prove this was the Brean bird. Following a brief stop in land-locked Derbyshire, and two days after its release at Brean, this bird decided to take up temporary residence at this freshwater lake, 188 miles northeast of its first port of call, but 25 miles short of the North Sea coast.





Plates 12 & 13. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, 10km west of Grip, Møre og Romsdal, Norway, 28th June 2007 (Bjørn Thomassen). The second for Norway.

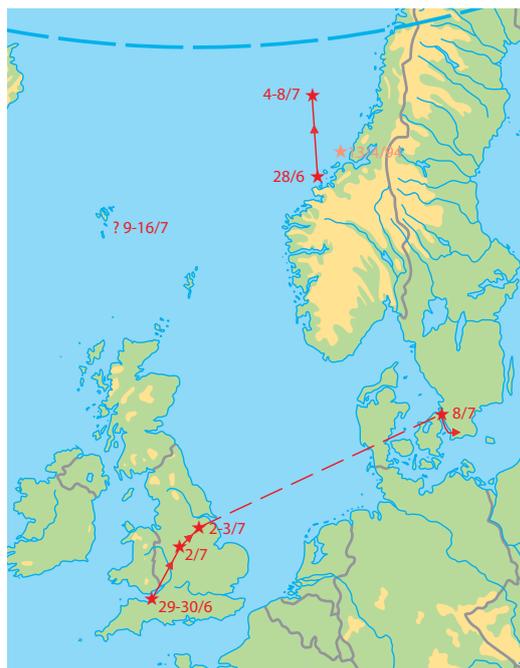
#### Norway

At about 3.00pm on 28th June 2007 (the day before the Somerset finding), a Yellow-nosed Albatross was found by fisherman Bjørn Thomassen at sea about 10km west of Grip, Møre og Romsdal, Norway. He saw it in flight and only for about one minute, but fortunately he managed to photograph the bird well, despite the quite rough sea. He sent the photographs to Tore Hals who confirmed that it was an albatross, as he had thought, and then to Kåre Bent Sunde who confirmed that it was an immature Yellow-nosed Albatross (of uncertain form). On 30th June, a party of seven Norwegian birders chartered a boat to the same area of sea, but failed to refind the bird, despite searching and chumming.

The same bird was then seen about 170 miles to the north, off the Heidrun oil platform, some 100 miles off the Norwegian coast, on 4th & 5th July, and again on 7th & 8th July. It was then not seen again, but fortunately it was photographed on 7th July. This bird had a white mark on the left side of the dark area of the rump, and this shows in the photographs taken at both Grip and Heidrun, so there is no doubt that it was the same individual. Interestingly, during the sightings at both localities, the albatross was harassed and chased by Great Black-backed Gulls, and the only time it was seen to alight on the water was the last time it was seen, when it was being chased by three Great Black-backed Gulls. There was also an unconfirmed record of the albatross off the Njord platform, between Grip and Heidrun, on 3rd July.

This represented the second ever record of (presumed Atlantic) Yellow-nosed Albatross for Norway and the Western Palearctic. The first was an adult Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross, also found and photographed by a fisherman, off Halten, Sør-Trøndelag, on 13th April 1994 (see photographs in *Birding World* 7: 242).

Figure 1. Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses in Europe in June/July 2007 (note the reports from the Faeroe Islands are uncorroborated).





Plates 14 & 15. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, 10km west of Grip, Møre og Romsdal, Norway, 28th June 2007 (*Bjørn Thomassen*). Note the size and shape relative to Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* (Plate 14) and immature Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* (Plate 15) in flight.

Plates 16-19. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Heidrun oil platform, Norway, 7th July 2007 (*Rolf Saether*). This bird was present in the seas off Norway for a period of at least eleven days, the dates of which overlapped those of the British and Swedish sightings. This individual, although obviously similar in overall appearance, showed a little more black on the underwing surround (see Plate 12).



### Sweden

At about 12.10pm on 8th July, a probable Yellow-nosed Albatross was reported heading south along the coast off Domsten, some 50km north of Malmö, southern Sweden. Just over an hour later, it was seen again off Landskrona, about 25km to the south, and here it was identified as a definite Yellow-nosed Albatross, and it was still heading south. Birders therefore dashed to the main seawatching site along the southern shore of the bay at Malmö, and here a quick and lucky few were able to twitch this bird. At about 2.00pm, it came into view several kilometres to the north and came closer and closer, and finally approached to within just 150 metres of the observers. It settled on the water briefly and attempted to take a fish from a Cormorant (which, however, hung onto the fish as the albatross tried to fly off with it!). The albatross then flew off to the east, and finally disappeared inland between two high-rise buildings! It was flying at a height of about 10m and, if it had carried on the same course, it would have had to travel overland some 120km before reaching the Baltic Sea, but it was not seen again. The weather was not exceptional at the

time – partly cloudy with just a light west-north-westerly wind – although the wind was rather stronger further to the north.

This bird can be told from the Norwegian one from the photographs, by its darker grey on the lower nape and upper back, and its grey markings on the lower neck-sides (E. Hirschfeld *in litt.*), but close examination of the underwing photographs confirms that it was the British bird.

### Faeroe Islands

The very next day (9th July) an albatross with a black bill was reported near Sandavagi, Faeroe Islands. It was not seen by a birder or described in detail but, interestingly, it flew away inland, just like the bird in Britain and Sweden. And then a full week later (on 16th July), a fisherman reported seeing an albatross 'with more than one colour on its bill' down to 10 metres at sea 22 miles southeast of Nolsoy, Faeroe Islands.

These two observations were less than 70km from each other, so it seems likely that it was the same bird, but unfortunately there are no detailed descriptions and no photographs. Local birder Silas Olofson did try to look for the bird off Nolsoy by boat, but without success.

Plate 20. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Malmö, Sweden, 8th July 2007 (Kristian Stahl). The first for Sweden. The Öresund bridge, linking Malmö to Copenhagen, is in the background.





Plates 21-24. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Malmö, Sweden, 8th July 2007 (Kristian Stahl). Similarities in the underwing pattern confirm that this is the same bird that was seen in England. By continuing its direction of travel, it reached the Swedish coast (550 miles in a straight line) five days after leaving its Lincolnshire lake. Once in Swedish waters, it proved twitchable (just!), before again flying off inland.



### Taxonomy

The taxonomy of the albatrosses has long been questioned, and it has been hotly debated particularly since the albatross conference held in Hobart, Tasmania, in September 1995. Shortly afterwards, Nunn *et al.* (1996) published the results of their DNA study into the relationships among the albatrosses, and notably separated the mollymawks from the great albatrosses into their own genus, *Thalassarche*. The proceedings of the conference were published three years later in Robertson & Nunn (1998) and included a radical revision of albatross taxonomy, which adopted the Phylogenetic Species Concept and raised many forms that had previously been considered subspecies to full species. Included in the many splits, Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross *T. carteri* was split from Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *T. chlororhynchos*. Although most seabird authorities accepted the splits, there was much criticism, particularly with the lack of published data supporting the original DNA study.

Penhallurick & Wink (2004) discussed the species concepts and re-examined the DNA sequences. They disagreed with Robertson & Nunn's interpretation of the data and, finding the DNA distance between the Indian Yellow-nosed and Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses to be only 0.35%, strongly suggested that *carteri* should be retained as a subspecies. It should be remembered that the rates of DNA evolution are slower for larger taxa and the albatrosses therefore have the slowest rate of divergence of any of the seabirds (Nunn & Stanley 1998). In turn, Rheindt & Austin (2005) then wrote that there were flaws within Penhallurick & Wink's paper, and they counselled against adopting their proposals.

The most recent pronouncement, in June 2007, was by the ACAP Taxonomy Working Group (2007), which recommended that the two taxa of yellow-nosed continue to be recognised as separate species. Their reasons given were 'consistent plumage and structural differences' which supported the genetic findings. These were primarily differences in adults, in the colour of the head, neck, lores and cheeks, and in the shapes of the bill stripe, culmicorn and naricorn (quoting Marchant & Higgins 1990). The plumage allows the two forms to be readily distinguished at sea, at least in adults, and morphometric data from Gough Island (Brooke *et al.* 1980) suggests that *chlororhynchos* has a shorter and deeper bill and a longer wing (although the wing variances recorded are largely due to wear).

All in all, the albatrosses, including the yellow-nosed albatrosses, have had a bumpy taxonomic ride, and there are still those entrenched on either side of the debate.

### Distribution

Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross breeds on Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island and normally ranges across the South Atlantic, mainly along the Subtropical Convergence (and thus less far south than Black-browed Albatross), north to about the Tropic of Capricorn. From mid Atlantic breeding grounds, birds range westwards to South America and eastwards to the coast of South Africa, occasionally occurring across the Indian Ocean to Australasia.

There have been about 30 or so records in the western North Atlantic and there have been an increasing number of sightings over the past three years from North Carolina and New England, all in spring/early summer, and including some birds resting on land on islands off North Carolina, Massachusetts and Maine (Ned Brinkley *in litt.*, see Plates 25-28). The exact number of individual birds being seen off the eastern USA is a matter of some conjecture, however. It could be just a very small number of birds (perhaps even as few as two, although probably more) that have been seen on repeated occasions (*eg* particularly on the numerous pelagic birding trips that run from North Carolina). The reasons for the increase are not known, but prey scarcity in the core range has been mooted as one possibility, while there are not thought to be any direct links to particular weather fluctuations such as the eastern Pacific *El Niño* (which is currently in decline).

Like other albatrosses, Atlantic Yellow-nosed is threatened by mortality from longline fisheries in the South Atlantic. Olmos *et al.* (in Flint & Swift 2000) calculated that the Brazilian long-lining fleet alone kills over 1,000 Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses annually. Birdlife International has assessed the species as Endangered, owing to the very small breeding range and the rate of decline, calculated from long-term studies as a 58% population reduction over three generations (72 years). The population models suggest that this may be an underestimate, and the species may need to be up-listed to Critically Endangered. The current population is estimated at 36,800 breeding pairs, corresponding to 165,000-185,000 birds (Cooper & Ryan 2004).

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross breeds on islands around the Subtropical Convergence in the southern Indian Ocean, and ranges north to the Tropic of Capricorn, east to Australasia and west to off South Africa.



Plates 25 & 26. Adult Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, off Massachusetts, USA, June 2007 (Craig Gibson). Note the underwing pattern, grey-washed head and distribution of colour on the bill. In adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross, the head is white and the base of the yellow culmen stripe narrows to a long, fine point.





Plates 27 & 28. Adult Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, released off Massachusetts, USA, June 2007 (Craig Gibson). This bird was originally found exhausted at Cape Neddick, Maine, USA, on 28th April 2007. It was taken into care and then released from a beach in Falmouth, Massachusetts, on 20th May, after being fitted with a satellite transmitter. Two hours after the release, it was observed flying down a highway in Plymouth, Massachusetts, roughly 10 miles from the release point, where it was found grounded again the next day. Once again, it was taken to a rehabilitation facility, and, on 2nd June, it was released a second time, this time from a boat at sea about 30 miles east of Boston, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, the transmitter failed, so no location data were received following the second release. The bird was then found dead on a beach in Barnstable, Massachusetts, on 26th June, and based on the condition of the carcass was judged to have been dead for about two weeks.



### Atlantic and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses

Classic adult Atlantic and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses (whether regarded as species or subspecies) are reasonably easy to separate in the field: Atlantic has a grey head, with only the forehead white, and has an obvious black eye-patch; Indian has the head pure white, and has a smaller black eye-patch. However, two caveats need adding. Firstly, worn adult *chlororhynchos* may show a white head (as noted off eastern South America, a main dispersal area, C. Savigny *in litt.*) and secondly, immature *chlororhynchos* can show adult-like bills, white heads and small eye-patches like adult Indian Yellow-nosed (Onley & Scofield 2007).

Juveniles and immatures of the two species are inseparable at sea. The eye-patch on immature *chlororhynchos* is smaller than in adults, with some showing virtually no eye-patch, like Indian (pers. obs. TP), so this is not a reliable feature. The underwing pattern of immatures is variable, but normally they show a narrower black border to the white underwing than Black-

browed Albatross of any age. However, some immatures can show a broad black leading edge to the underwing approaching that of adult Black-browed Albatross.

Brooke *et al.* (1980) noted that the shape of the base of the yellow stripe on the culmen varied between adults of the two forms: pointed in Indian and rounded in Atlantic. In immatures, it is normally more rounded in Atlantic too, but this is not totally reliable. Robertson (2002) found the shape of the base of the entire culmen was more important. Expanding on Marchant & Higgins (1990), he noted that, looking down onto the bill, in Atlantic the culminicorn broadens behind the nares with a rounded base at the bare skin, and the naricorn has convex sides while, in Indian, the culminicorn tapers and is pointed at the base, and the naricorn has straight sides. This important feature, to date, has been found to be consistent. In the hand or at very close range, a yellow-nosed albatross of any age can be identified by these differences in bill morphology.

Figure 2. Shape of proximal culminicorn in, from left, adult Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *T. chlororhynchos*, adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross *T. carteri* and immature Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross (from Robertson 2002).

Note the shapes of the culmen stripe and proximal margin of the culminicorn, and naricorn (see text).

Plate 29. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brea, Somerset, June 2007

(Richard Austin/www.secretworld.org). The Somerset bird shows a rounded, broad proximal end (black) to the culminicorn and a rounded end to the yellow culmen stripe, typical of Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross.

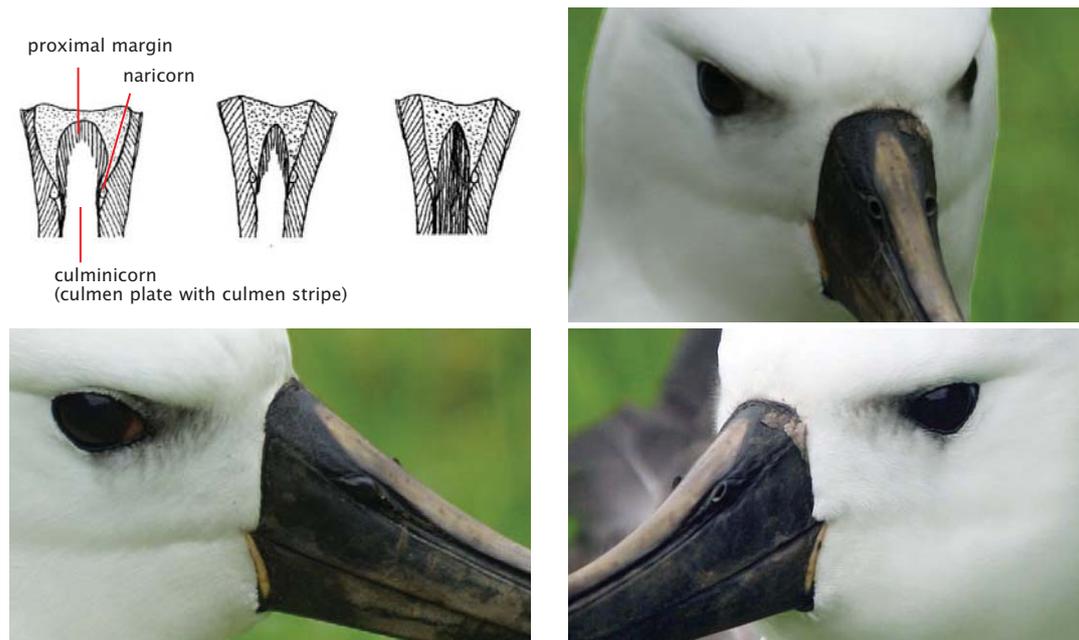
Plate 30. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brea, Somerset, June 2007

(Richard Austin/www.secretworld.org). Another view, showing the clearly rounded edges of the culminicorn at the line of the exposed skin.

Plate 31. Immature Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Brea, Somerset, June 2007

(Richard Austin/www.secretworld.org). The culminicorn shape shows why this bird can be identified to species.

Without these good quality photographs, this first for Britain might well not have been specifically identified.



### Ageing

The great albatrosses – the various Wandering and Royal Albatrosses – generally take about 10 years to reach maturity and begin breeding, and they show a complex and bewildering variety of plumages before becoming adult.

The smaller albatrosses – the members of the genus *Thalassarche*, collectively known as mollymawks, with the yellow-nosed being the smallest of all – generally take six or seven years to reach maturity. From fledging, yellow-nosed have an all-black bill, and this bill colour may be retained into the second year. As the bird matures, the culminicorn changes colour, from black to brownish-yellow, and then to pale creamy-yellow before the bright yellow of adults. This changing of colour is not clear-cut, however. It is variable, with even some seven year-old breeding adults not yet having the full yellow colour.

Albatrosses have evolved intricate moult patterns, and adult mollymawk species replace their feathers to suit either annual or biennial breeding cycles. It is known with Black-browed Albatross that the moult of young birds is complex, but the moult cycles for immature yellow-nosed albatrosses have never been formally described. This is not surprising, as the world's museums have very few albatross specimens catalogued to the bird's age, due to the fact that immatures are entirely pelagic and do not return to their breeding islands for many years. The gradual ageing progression for these birds involves changes to the crown and hood colour, and the hindneck mottling and barring, as well as visible wear and loss and replacement of coverts and flight and tail feathers.

### The Somerset bird

The Somerset bird can be assumed to be an Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross on geography alone but, while *chlororhynchos* is regularly recorded in the western North Atlantic – and the British and European birds documented here surely came via there on the recent weather systems – both species regularly occur as close as off Cape Town, South Africa.

Immediately on hearing about the bird, TP contacted Pauline Kidner at Secret World Wildlife Rescue to ask if any feathers or faeces were available. DNA or isotope markers could have established the origin of the bird, and possibly more. However, by then, the holding pen had already been cleaned thoroughly (and was occupied by a Badger!), so this was an unfortunate lost opportunity.

However, a good series of digital photographs had been taken and from these it is possible to

see that the culminicorn shape proves conclusively the bird was an Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross. The small eye-patch shown by the Somerset bird is also correct for a young Atlantic Yellow-nosed.

The photographs of the Somerset bird show the plumage to be very uniform. There is some wear or fading on the forward mantle, the pattern of worn edges to the upperwing-coverts looks quite even, and the primaries show relatively little sign of wear. These features, combined with the incipient pale culminicorn, would put the bird into second or third year category. Photographs taken at the bird's release, and one photograph taken inside the centre, show that p4 had been dropped on both wings. Studies by SOSSA (Southern Oceans Seabird Study Association), ringing various albatross species off New South Wales, Australia have produced invaluable information, with some data going back 50 years.

Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses retain all their primaries for the first two years. Moult begins at p8 ascending to p10. These feathers generate the most lift for albatrosses and hence show the greatest wear. Primaries p3 or p4 are usually replaced after p10 is fully-grown, or just before (Lindsay Smith *in litt.*). As fledging occurs in late March and April, and assuming that young Atlantic Yellow-nosed has the same moult sequence (although not specifically studied and noting that birds found outside their normal range can show uncharacteristic patterns), the Somerset bird was almost certainly 26 or 27 months beyond leaving the nest, and 30 or 31 months of age from hatching.

Plate 32. Immature Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*, Drake Passage, South Atlantic, March 2006 (Marc Guyt). Note the dusky underwing margins, with white restricted to the centre portion.





Plates 33 & 34. Immature Black-browed Albatrosses *Thalassarche melanophrys*, Drake Passage, South Atlantic, March 2006 (*Marc Guyt*). These are immatures, but note that juvenile Black-browed Albatross is dark-billed, although the underwing pattern is very different (being dark). Whereas both yellow-nosed albatrosses show a narrow dark leading edge (and very fine dark trailing edge) to the underwing (somewhat suggestive of the 'Shy group'), the dark border shown by Black-browed almost overwhelms the white centre. Note that any smudginess of dark tends to coalesce (thus increasing the apparent width of the dark areas) when viewed at sea.





Plate 35. Adult Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Tristan da Cunha, South Atlantic, March 2006 (Marc Guyt).

#### Occurrence and Western Palearctic status

Although the bird seen in Somerset, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire is regarded as the first for Britain, there is a report of a Yellow-nosed Albatross being shot on the River Trent at Stockwith, near Gainsborough, Lincolnshire (only 20 miles from Messingham!) on 25th November 1836, but the record has been refuted, mainly because the specimen cannot be found. Also, one was reported 40 miles south of the Lizard, Cornwall, on 29th April 1985 (and published in *Sea Swallow* 42: 63-65), but again the record is not accepted. Both of these were reported as being grey-headed adults, and thus of the Atlantic form, and there are also reports from Iceland (c.1844, a skeleton specimen), France (1889, specimen now a Grey-headed Albatross, but may have been switched) and some 300 miles WSW of Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, Ireland (on 5th December 1986, and published in *Sea Swallow* 36: 32-46) that are not accepted onto the Western Palearctic list (Bourne 1992).

It seems highly likely that the unseasonable low pressure systems that tracked eastwards across the North Atlantic and brought the summer floods to much of England also brought these Yellow-nosed Albatrosses to Europe.

#### References

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