



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Pelagic Seabirds

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES: Seabirds are an assemblage of bird species that spend nearly all or major parts of their lives at sea. Seabirds off the coast of Massachusetts comprise a broad group of species including loons, gannets, petrels, storm-petrels, shearwaters, cormorants, gulls, terns, alcids, and phalaropes. Where some of these species have an individual species account elsewhere, the following are included in this group account.

- Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*)
- Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*)
- Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*)
- Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)
- Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)
- Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*)
- Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*)



Photo of Northern Gannet by Andreas Trepte



Photo of Atlantic Puffin by Jörg Hempel

SPECIES DESCRIPTIONS: Shearwaters are medium-sized and long-winged seabirds that fly with characteristically stiff wing beats. Their name comes from the flight pattern of gliding along the troughs of waves and “shearing” the water. Shearwaters seen off of

the coast of Massachusetts are long-distance migrants that circumnavigate the Atlantic Ocean.

The Northern Gannet is an easily recognizable species with a white body, black wingtips, and silvery beak. Juveniles have a dark plumage; their plumage becomes a mix of light and dark markings until they reach their mature adult plumage at 3 years or more of age. Gannets have a dramatic foraging technique that involves diving straight down, plunging into the water in search of their fish prey.

The Atlantic Puffin, a stocky and medium-sized alcid, has a black back and wings, white belly, and large yellow and orange beak. In the Gulf of Maine, puffins forage on a variety of fish and young are fed smaller species (e.g., herring, hake, and sand lance). Historically, populations declined as puffins were exploited for feathers and food (e.g., egg, hunting). Recently, some breeding populations have experienced widespread

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

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nesting failure as a result of chick starvation, which is thought to result from climate change.

The Red and Red-necked Phalaropes are Arctic breeding shorebirds that spend time in pelagic environments during the non-breeding period. The more pelagic of the two species is the Red Phalarope, which spends up to 11 months of the year in this environment, as both its migration and over-wintering habitat are pelagic. Phalaropes show reversed sexual dimorphism where females are the larger and more colorful sex, and males are responsible for incubating eggs and feeding young.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Within this diverse group of birds, each species has a unique distribution. Of the species listed in this account, only the Manx Shearwater has a history of breeding in Massachusetts. The first breeding record in North America was documented on Penikese Island in 1973. Sooty Shearwaters nest in the southern hemisphere and Cory's Shearwater nests in the Atlantic off of southern Europe and northern Africa. All of these species can be seen foraging off of the Massachusetts coast between May and October. Northern Gannets and Atlantic Puffins breed on islands or coastal cliffs in the North Atlantic and also can be seen off of the coast of Massachusetts outside of the breeding season. The phalaropes are Holarctic breeders and can be found in pelagic areas around Massachusetts throughout much of the year.

Although little is known about pelagic birds, there is evidence they are experiencing long-term declines. In fact, global seabird populations are thought to have dropped by 70% since the 1950s. Seabirds are considered to be good biological indicators, and their precipitous population decline could be a result of a degraded marine ecosystem.

THREATS: Seabird declines are likely a result of a number of factors that potentially threaten their populations. These include entanglement in fishing gear, a reduction in their food resources as a result of over-fishing, ecological changes associated with climate change, invasive nest predators that have been introduced to islands with large nesting colonies, plastic and oil pollution, direct exploitation (e.g., harvesting eggs, chicks, adults), and threats associated with development and energy production (e.g., wind turbines).

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