

# Offshore Sea Life ID Guide

## East Coast



Steve N.G. Howell and Brian L. Sullivan

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In collaboration with  
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*An unusually curious  
Loggerhead Turtle.*

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Atlantic White-sided Dolphin, Black-capped Petrel, and Sargassum Midget  
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*Believed extinct by the 1600s, Bermuda Petrel (above) was rediscovered in the 1900s and its nesting grounds were located in 1951. This attractive gadfly petrel has since been the subject of an intensive conservation campaign, and today it is likely that 500 or so birds range over the North Atlantic. Still, the chances of seeing one off the East Coast remain slim.*

**Abbreviations.** To save space we often use four-letter codes for species names; the codes are listed as an index on pp. 63–64. Likewise, standard state abbreviations are used: DE for Delaware, FL Florida, MA Massachusetts, MD Maryland, ME Maine, NC North Carolina, NH New Hampshire, NJ New Jersey, VA Virginia. For months we use 3 letters: Feb for February, Jun for June, etc. North, central, south, etc., are usually abbreviated as n., cen., s., etc. We use the Latin abbreviation ‘cf.’ for ‘compare with.’

We define the Northeast as the Gulf of Maine south to Cape Cod, Massachusetts; the Mid-Atlantic Coast as Long Island, New York, south to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; and the Southeast as Cape Hatteras south to Florida.

## Introduction

What do the following have in common? Humpback Whales lunge-feeding and breaching, snappy-looking Black-capped Petrels wheeling over cobalt blue waters, multicolored flyingfish gliding over glassy seas flecked with golden Sargassum weed. Well, for the most part, you can't see them from shore. You'll need to experience these offshore wonders on a boat trip, often called a 'pelagic trip' by birdwatchers.

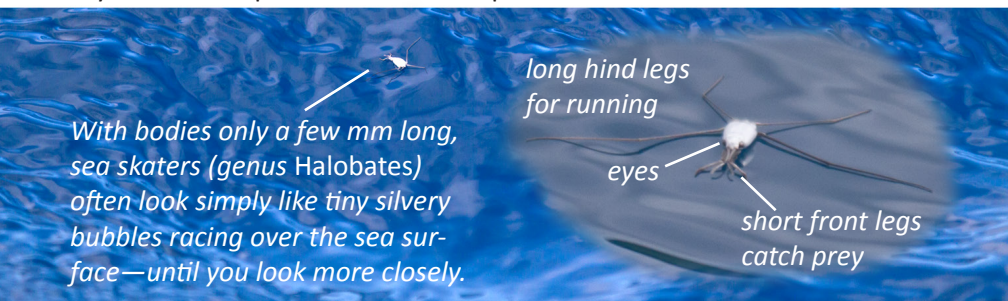
This identification guide uses plates of composite photos to help you identify offshore marine wildlife—'things you see at sea,' be they whales, birds, dolphins, turtles, sharks, or flyingfish. Short accounts distill the essence of identification—wildlife views at sea can be brief, and the less time you spend reading a book the better. Once you have a name, numerous other resources are available to help you learn more about the creatures that inhabit the oceans. But that all-important handle, a species name, is the first step in the cascade of knowledge.

We focus on species seen on day trips off the East Coast (Maine to central Florida; see map inside back cover), not those found far offshore in waters few people get to visit. Some species we include can be seen from shore but are also found offshore, and are usually considered as marine creatures. We don't include coastal birds such as most gulls, terns, cormorants, sea ducks, loons, grebes, or even some 'marine' mammals (they're called *Harbor Seals* for a reason; below); even though you may see these from boats they can all be watched more easily from shore. We also do not include real rarities, species you might never see even on 100 trips, such as a Bermuda Petrel (opposite).



*Gray Seals (the 2 larger, longer-nosed animals near front) and Harbor Seals are inshore and coastal animals, seen on rocky headlands and islands, not truly offshore creatures.*

The harder you look at the ocean the more you see. We cut off our coverage at about apple-size organisms, which is what most people are likely to notice. However, if you look carefully, on calm days you might see many more things, including the amazing sea skaters, ocean-going wingless insects related to the water striders you can see on freshwater ponds. Most species, like those shown below, occur in the Pacific Ocean, but one species, *Halobates micans*, can be seen off the Southeast. All species look very similar except under a microscope.



One thing you'll soon notice is that wildlife is not evenly distributed at sea. On your way offshore you pass through the inshore zone, often alive with coastal 'seabirds' such as gulls, terns, pelicans, and cormorants, most of which tend to disappear when you get a few miles offshore. Then you are in the world of whales, petrels, and flyingfish—the pelagic zone.

*Sargassum (below, and p. 60) often bunches up at fronts within the Gulf Stream. Such weedlines are good places to find terns, phalaropes, and flyingfish.*

