



howard county
BIRD CLUB
50th ANNIVERSARY • 1972 – 2022

MEMBERS' MEMORIES

John Oetting

When I moved to Columbia in August of 1973, I'd already been birding for several years, so I joined the Howard County, MOS as soon as I heard about it and have been a member ever since. During this time, I've had many pleasant experiences with the club, including birding with Chandler Robbins, touring Jug Bay by boat, and learning about bees and wasps on a trip to Hart-Miller Island in 2017. But the one experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life was, unfortunately for me, an unpleasant one – a pelagic birding trip to Baltimore Canyon in April of 1975. While not an official MOS trip, a member of the club had begun to organize boat trips to the Canyon that had been successful in finding a good many pelagic species, including some that had not been previously identified in Maryland. Excited about the possibility of adding new species to my life list, I reserved two spots on the April trip for my fiancée and me. We drove down to Ocean City, MD the Saturday before the trip, hoping to spend some time exploring the inlet; however, a cold and persistent rain spoiled any chance of that. The forecast for Sunday was bleak, calling for more rain, wind, and cold weather. We wondered if the trip would be cancelled. We arose early on Sunday to get to the dock on time and found out that the trip was still on. We were told that the ocean would be rather rough once we got outside the harbor, but we took no provisions to prevent sea sickness since neither one of us had ever had a problem with it.

When the boat left the dock, it was not only rainy but foggy. By the time we got out into the open water, it was so foggy that we couldn't see a thing. The small boat, just large enough to hold 50 people uncomfortably, was rocking and rolling. Soon many of our fellow birders started getting seasick. At one point, I began to feel ill and went down below hoping that would help. Instead, I found that the area below deck was filled with people in various stages of seasickness, all of them in bad shape. The smell drove me to head back up to the deck. While I felt as sick as a dog for the rest of the trip, my fiancée was perfectly fine. I couldn't eat my lunch. No one was seeing any birds until finally we saw a pair of gannets soar through the fog into view. I'd seen thousands of gannets on their nesting grounds on a trip to Newfoundland, so I wasn't thrilled. They were the only birds we saw on the entire trip.

We were stuck 50 miles offshore with no possibility of salvation. I thought that I'd have to endure being seasick for the full six-hour trip, but finally, perhaps under the threat of a mutiny, the leader and the boat captain decided to terminate the trip early and return to port. As soon as the boat started heading toward shore, I began to feel better. When we could finally see land, I felt wonderful. When we stepped off the boat onto dry land, I vowed that I would never ever take another pelagic trip. Because the memory of that trip is still with me, I've had no trouble keeping that vow for the past 46 years. I'm sure I've missed seeing a lot of great birds, but I'm happy to live with that.