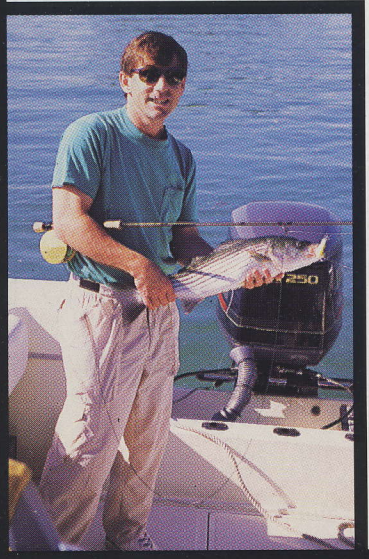
PHOTO: JOE HEALY

An auspicious sight for any fly fisher: birds on the surface and gamefish underneath. Knowing the preferred foods of seabirds will tip you off to the right flies to throw into this sort of fracas.

STRIPED BASS SPECTACULAR

FIELD STUDY

A PRIMER ON NORTHEAST SEABIRDS



Feeding birds can reveal the location of striped bass, bluefish, and other saltwater species. But not all seabirds feed the same way, or on the same bait.

Bird was the word: this angler profited from his knowledge of seabird behavior by discerning that gulls were feeding on herring, and then casting a herring fly to this foraging striper.

BY TOM KEER

It almost seems as if The Trashmen *had* to be saltwater fishermen when they composed their hit "Surfin' Bird" in 1964. "Everyone knows, about the bird," they sang. But in the case of Northeast saltwater fly fishers—how well do we know our birds?

Knowing how to identify Northeast seabirds will by no means spell the difference between fly-fishing success and failure, but it can help your fishing in many ways. Knowing your birds will certainly enhance your fishing experience, and it can offer an alternative to prospecting water in which you think there might be fish, but you just aren't sure.

Saltwater anglers in the Northeast focus their attention on several types of birds: gulls, terns, shearwaters, petrels, gannets, cormorants, and blue herons. The gulls we typically see in the Northeast are great black-backed gulls, herring gulls, and some laughing gulls.

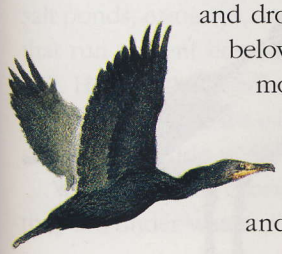
Though these birds are known to scavenge around trash cans and never turn away a free meal, fishermen should pay close attention to the gulls' saltwater fare. It's a good idea to examine the spider crabs, clams, and mussels that herring gulls pick at around the shore's edge, but your main focus should be on the birds' choice of large baitfish. Of specific interest is when the gulls feed on blue- and black-backed herring, mackerel, and menhaden—these are the baitfish on which large striped bass key.

Smaller birds such as terns tend to feed on smaller bait, most notably silversides, sand eels, and bay anchovies. We mostly see the common tern in the Northeast.

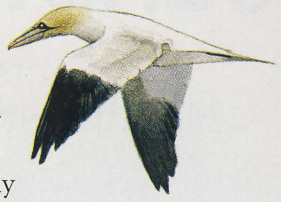
Shearwaters follow schools of mackerel and squid and also feed on crustaceans and plankton. Cory's shearwater is the only shearwater to breed and live on the East Coast; other shearwaters migrate north to breed. You'll see lots of shearwaters following fishing boats looking for handouts, but Cory's shearwaters are true fishermen.

Petrels feed heavily on squid, and though they are mostly ocean birds, you'll occasionally see them in coves and bays. They have keen night vision, and oftentimes you'll find them feeding on plankton or shrimps. Petrels usually arrive in the Northeast when the squid show up.

Gannets are migratory birds that spend the summer months in Newfoundland and the winter months in Florida. You'll see them along the Northeast coast in the fall during their migration. Gannets soar as high as 50 feet and drop at a fast clip, plunging deep below the surface to intercept baitfish, mostly herring. The northern gannet is the gannet most commonly seen in the Northeast.



Cormorants are diving ducks and feed on baitfish and crustaceons. Blue herons are typically found in river estuary systems, occupying a particular stand and waiting patiently for food to arrive, primarily fish. And when sea ducks arrive on the Northeast coast? Get ready to pack it in; your fishing season is just about over.



GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Some general observations about seabirds can help Northeast anglers locate striped bass, bluefish, bonito, and false albacore. A large, tightly knit concentration of birds diving on the water is an excellent indicator that baitfish are present. If bait is around, chances are good that predatory gamefish are close by. In deeper water such as rips or channels, bass and blues push the bait into balls and drive them toward the surface, where they are easy prey for the fish and the birds.

In the spring, it's common to see striped bass crashing herring and menhaden at the surface and gulls swooping down and picking up juvenile and adult baitfish. Anglers who may not be able to identify the bait in the water only have to study the gulls as they lift off the water's surface; many times it's easy to spot the bait as the gulls tip back their head to swallow.

On a moving tide, particularly a dropping tide, you will find gulls working uptide and at the top of the school of fish. Because baitfish schools become concentrated on a dropping tide, it makes good sense to watch the gulls to see what, if any, patterns emerge. Instead of racing your boat through the school of fish to get to the top (and thereby spooking most of the fish), follow the gulls' flight pattern. Turn your boat away from the school, quietly motor into a position slightly above the fish, then kill your engine and drift back through. An electric trolling motor may come in handy to quietly keep pace with the birds and the fish.

READING BIRD SIGNALS

When it comes to revealing the presence of fish, terns are not always as reliable as gulls are. While wading an estuary along the North Shore of Massachusetts last year, I saw a tremendous number of terns diving where the river water poured over a sandbar. The water depth went from 18 feet in the river to 2 feet over the bar, and as the tide dropped sand eels were washed into the shallow water.

Though hundreds of terns dove into the water, it was clear that there were no fish present; the terns were simply picking up bait. I moved uptide of the birds into deeper water and quickly got into a mix of bass, small blues, and shad. Working the deeper channel below the

SEABIRDS OF THE NORTHEAST

Facts on Northeast Seabirds

- Gulls are large, mainly gray, black, or white and have bills with a slight hook at the end with which they catch fish and crustaceans, or use to root through refuse.
- Terns have straight, pointed beaks that are mostly used for catching small fish.
- The shearwaters and petrels that breed in North America have tubular nostrils and long, pointed wings that are held stiffly during long flights. Shearwaters and petrels are oftentimes confused for either small gulls or large terns.
- Only one species of gannet breeds in North America; they nest on rocky cliffs and islands.
- Cormorants are usually black with long, hooked bills. Their feet are located far back on their bodies to give them ample underwater thrust.
- Herons have long bills that help them catch fish. Their feet are unwebbed, as they stalk their prey and don't swim.

A Word on Birds...

You might have a tough time figuring out the difference between traveling birds and stationary birds. By watching a birds' wing beats, however, you can often gather enough information to make an educated guess about what the birds are doing. A long, slow rhythm indicates that a bird or a group of birds is looking for bait or scoping out a resting spot; short, erratic rhythms suggest that the dinner bell has rung. Watch to see how the birds congregate. If they stay in a large pack, chances are a school of fish has corralled bait. If the birds drift around and spread out, there may be multiple schools of fish, baitfish alone, or bait and fish spread out. You'll see the clustered behavior more on a dropping tide, and spread-out flocks on a rising tide.

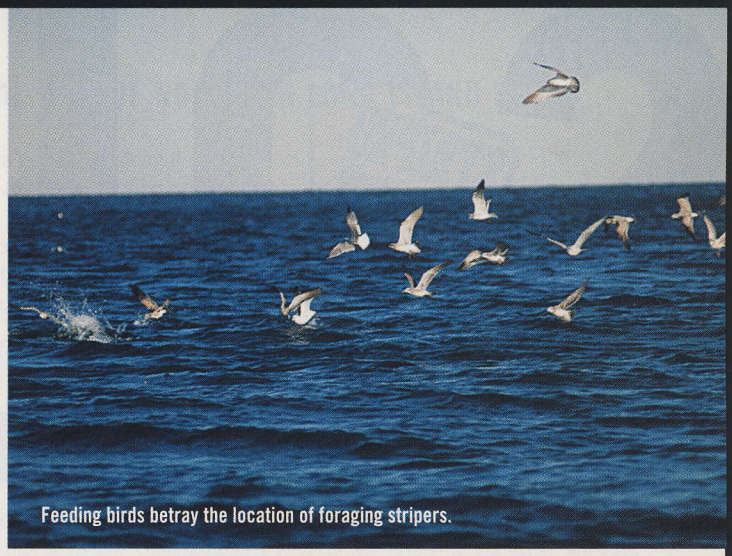
Look Out for Lookouts

Don't overlook single birds. A single gull or tern very well may be the avant-garde, the front-runner for the entire avian operation. One time on Block Island I watched a knot of birds working a sand flat. It was last light and sand eels were everywhere. The tide had just started to come in and there was one tern working the edge of the drop-off. That's where the fish were. An hour later, all of the fish had moved up on the flat.

—T.K.

ILLUSTRATIONS: LARRY LARGAY

PHOTO: MICHAEL MELFORD



Feeding birds betray the location of foraging stripers.

flock of terns I once again found fish. The terns did help me locate the fish, only the schools weren't underneath the birds, as I had initially expected them to be.

A mix of gulls and terns can tell you a few things. First, the birds could be feeding on small bait driven to the surface by fish. Second, there could be a mixture of big and small bait like herring and silversides, and the gulls could be keying on the herring as the terns focus on the silversides. Third, a pod of bluefish could be ripping up herring, mackerel, or menhaden, leaving the gulls to dive on the herring while the terns pick up pieces of shredded bait. Keep your eyes on what the birds pick up and you'll get some clues as to what bait is around and what flies to tie on. Sometimes, you'll see cormorants feeding on bait, though it doesn't necessarily mean that fish are around.

REGIONAL NUANCES

Pip Winslow is a lifelong saltwater angler who fishes the Merrimack River system in Massachusetts. The birds he typically encounters are black-backed gulls, common gulls, and herring gulls, which he finds typically key on larger bait such as menhaden and herring.

In the estuaries he fishes, Winslow doesn't find many gulls crashing the surface or big flocks of birds in the air. Instead, he looks for smaller groups of birds either on the water or sitting on the riverbanks. The gulls are constantly feeding in areas where bait is trapped, such as current seams, rips, ocean holes, or skinny water. Winslow will oftentimes bypass the smaller birds (terns) and look for the gulls, which foretell bigger bait and bigger fish.

Winslow makes mental notes about where the birds are perched and will sit for up to an hour observing their behavior; seeing birds staking out the same spot over several days indicates that the area may be a feeding zone for bigger fish. To reach the fish without disturbing them, Winslow will use a kayak or get out of his boat to wade the banks.

Similarly, great blue herons are specific about where they feed and will stand where baitfish are most abundant. When Winslow spots a heron, he'll spend 15 to 30 minutes observing its behavior. Often, fish show up just after the heron starts to feed. Winslow considers herons to be the most-overlooked seabird in the Northeast.

Kenney Abrames, author of *Striper Moon* and *A Perfect Fish*, watches birds very closely on the Rhode Island salt ponds, estuaries, and rocks. Abrames looks for birds that run current edges, a likely place in which to trap bait. He says that feeding birds appear when the current appears, whether it's early on in a tide change during a strong moon tide or later during a weaker phase.

When watching cormorants, Abrames counts how long they are under water. A bird that is under for more than 20 seconds is searching for bait; many times these birds will surface quite a distance from where they sounded. Cormorants that are under for short periods and surface close to where they went under are probably on bait.

He says that it's crucial to note when a bird changes direction; either it has seen something worth following or is keeping up with a school of bait changing its course. Abrames also looks for clues from sea ducks, and in particular ruddy ducks, oldsquaws, and bluebills.

The Connecticut coastline offers a completely different set of fishing circumstances for Capt. Dan Wood. He fishes the rips, reefs, and several islands from Plum Island, New York, to Stonington, Connecticut. Out in open water, birds offer clues that are crucial to an angler's success.

Once he's spotted birds, Wood identifies their body language. Terns or gulls that are working bait are relaxed, casually diving to pick up their food; they seem to be taking their time. When the bait is concentrated by fish, however, the birds aren't as relaxed. The terns and gulls become more focused and hurry to compete for the bait. Wood also watches high-flying birds. He suspects that from their vantage point, the birds can see silver flashes as fish roll under the surface.

Wood has found that terns arrive in southern Connecticut around Memorial Day and depart around Labor Day. They are a key source of information for striped-bass and bluefish anglers during the summer, and also telegraph the first runs of bonito and false albacore. Though terns feed mostly on silversides, sand eels, and bay anchovies, Wood has also found that they feed heavily on crab larvae.

Before Memorial Day and after Labor Day, Wood takes his cues from gulls. In addition to feeding on big bait, gulls key on squid. Finally, when gulls are flying low to the water, it can mean that bonito and false albacore are present; gulls stay close to the surface to keep pace with these fast gamefish.

Tom Keer is a freelance writer and fly fisher who lives in Boston. He last wrote in SFF *about traveling with fly-fishing gear.*