

An Encounter with a Wandering Albatross

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Three hours to the shelf in a fragile boat,
The bitter wind piercing my fleece-lined coat.
For all of the trip we were bounced and tossed,
These winter pelagics come at a cost!
Just beyond the shelf we started our drift.
The first birds arrived, our spirits did lift!

Our leader unpacked the tools of our trade,
Basically, these were lures that he'd made;
Oiled chicken mince, with a spoon to fling,
And a cod-livered rag tied by a string.
With spoonfuls of mince, we started "chumming",
In no time at all, the birds were coming.

The seas were rough and the boat bucked about,
We stuck to our task, you may have no doubt.
The old hands with their cameras clicking,
And all the newcomers, madly ticking.
Two people felt seasick; that's quite the norm
It may have been more if we'd had the storm.

Prions and petrels glided o'er our slick
And landed, for chicken morsels to pick.
Lots of mollymawks were also around,
And some storm-petrels, making not a sound.
A White-fronted Tern put in a brief show
Some people saw it, and some were too slow.

Already the day was far from a loss
When, riding the slick, came an albatross.
A giant Wanderer, to our great delight;
Its wingspan immense, its back all white.
It soared and wheeled, its flight seemed so easy
In comparison with the other species.

Ahead of the wave front it surfed the air,
Seemingly carefree, but its eyes aware.
It circled the boat, reviewing the scene
'Though we were excited, it was serene.
Effortless in its every motion,
A self-confident king of the ocean.

It eyed us closely, wings never flapping,
Ignoring the photographers snapping,
Then all of a sudden it banked and propped
And onto the grey-green water it dropped,
Ten metres from the boat, in a wave trough
Watchful at first, alert for quick take-off.

It floated a while, bobbing up and down,
Dwarfing all of the other birds around.
With the risks assessed, the albatross
Opted for food, and so paddled across.
And with grunts and honks, not at all tuneful,
It fed on 'chum', lunging at each spoonful.

Due to its size, the other birds hung back
It was very clear which one ruled the pack!
With the bird so close, we all gazed in awe
Our spirits made buoyant by what we saw.
Finally, when it had eaten its fill,
It drifted away, to digest its meal.

For more than an hour, it sat on the slick
As it slowly processed its 'chum' picnic.
Then, spreading its wings, it made a few flaps,
And it lifted away from the whitecaps.
One more lap of the boat, once more a view,
Then it turned to the wind, and off it flew.