



It was a dark and stormy night. I was sailing on a schooner with my shipmate, Sean. He noticed a tiny bird huddled in the small boat that was hung off our stern. The bird had probably just stopped to rest, but it was having trouble taking off again because its feet kept slipping on the paint, which kept it from being able to reach up into the wind. Sean gently picked it up, cuddling the bird in one hand. It was dark grey, like ash, and weighed less than a small ball of yarn. Sean lifted his hand up and let the bird flutter away, into the wind and rain and pitch dark.

This bird was a storm petrel, the smallest of open ocean seabirds and related to shearwaters and terns. Storm petrels are often found in “fowl” weather, so superstitious sailors used to think the birds were little black witches, actually the cause for the storms. Many sailors still believe storm petrels can help forecast rough weather. Sir Francis Chichester, who set a record for the fastest solo circumnavigation in 1967, often saw these birds in the Southern Seas, home of the most furious waves and winds on Earth.

He wrote: “That evening a big swell began running in suddenly from the west; big, I would say 50 feet. There were a number of [Storm Petrels] about, which nearly always forecasts a storm,

whatever meteorologists may say to the contrary. I could see them picking things out of the water while on the wing.”

There are about twenty different kinds of storm petrels. They live all over the world, some migrating vast distances between continents and oceans. The word *petrel* probably comes from the story of St. Peter, who, it was said, could walk on water. These birds appear to tiptoe over the waves because, while they’re eating churned-up plankton, their feet skitter over the surface, as if they’re treading air. A common nickname for a storm petrel is a “Mother Carey’s Chicken.” This might come from the Latin phrase, *Mater Cara*, which referred to the Virgin Mary, the protector of sailors. Or maybe it’s



STORM PETREL (HYDROBATES PELAGICUS)



AND NOW FOR THE WEATHER...

Sailors are a superstitious lot. For centuries, they have used nature's signs to predict the weather. Take a look at some of these traditional rhymes:

Mackerel sky and mares' tails,
Make lofty ships carry low sails.

When rain comes before the wind,
halyards, sheets and braces mind,
But when wind comes before rain,
soon you may make sail again.

Red sky at night, sailor's delight;
Red sky in the morning,
sailors take warning
The evening red and morning gray
Are sure signs of a fine day,
But the evening gray and the morning red,
Makes the sailor shake his head.

And, of course . . .

Whether the weather be fine
Or whether the weather be not
Whether the weather be cold
Or whether the weather be hot
We'll weather the weather
Whatever the weather
Whether we like it or not.

from an old fairy tale about a farmer, named Mother Carey, who tended the entire ocean as if it was her field. Charles Leland wrote down this song in 1895:

**WITH THE WIND OLD MOTHER CAREY,
YO HO OH!
CHURNS THE SEA TO MAKE HER DAIRY:
YO HO OH!**

**WHEN YOU SEE A STORM A-BREWIN',
YO HO OH!
THAT IS MOTHER CAREY'S DOIN':
YO HO OH!**

**WHEN YOU SEE MOTHER CAREY'S CHICKENS,
YO HO OH!
THEN LOOK OUT TO CATCH THE DICKENS!
YO HO OH!**

Before electricity, residents of some Scottish islands used to thread a wick through dead Storm Petrels and light them like a candle. The oil in their bodies is supposed to burn very well, which is interesting because when these birds get angry, they'll actually spit out a gob of oil as a defense. Thinking back on that dark and stormy night, I'm amazed Sean didn't get a goopy splat of oil in his eye.

In the next issue of *Sea History*, we'll sail away from the rough weather and visit the tropics, where we'll meet a type of dolphin that's only three feet long. ⚓