

# It's Not Easy Being Green

Albatross, gadfly petrels, shearwaters, jaegers—what a birder doesn't dream of seeing these marvelous and mysterious birds of the open ocean? And what is intimidating enough to keep even the most avid birder onshore? Seasickness! This is not without good reason. Being seasick is a truly miserable experience, and it can definitely curb one's enthusiasm for pelagic birding.

I give talks on pelagic birding, and when I'm done the hands go up immediately. The first question isn't "How often do you see Laysan Albatross?" or "What's the best time of year to see Flesh-footed Shearwaters?" The first question inevitably is "How do you avoid getting seasick?"

Weather conditions offshore can vary considerably, and even a slight variation in wind direction can make the difference between a smooth and a rough trip. Anyone can get seasick, even veteran skippers and enthusiastic trip leaders. (The word nausea is derived from the Greek word *naus*, which means ship.) It resolves once you get onshore, but unfortunately that's often hours away from the time you first get sick.

Seasickness certainly won't kill you (even though you may wish it would), but if you do get sick, it is important to avoid dehydration (as well as the germs that you may get from kissing the ground when you return to shore).

Seasickness occurs when your brain perceives conflicting signals between what your eyes are seeing and your sense of balance.

The three stages of seasickness are:

1. You're afraid you're going to get sick.
2. You're afraid you're going to die.
3. You're afraid you're *not* going to die.

All joking aside, it's prudent to put some thought into preventative measures before you get on board; it is much easier to avoid seasickness altogether rather than to try to treat the symptoms.

## Medications

There are a number of well-known medications that can help you avoid seasickness.

Many birders swear by scopolamine patches, which are worn behind the ear. They are available only by prescription.

For those who have tried scopolamine in the past and have had a bad experience with side effects, there's some good news: It was taken off the market in 1994 due to

manufacturing problems, but it became available again in 1997 with the side-effect profile now being much more favorable. So if you tried the patch prior to 1994 and didn't like the side effects, it may be worth a try again. The most-common side effect is a dry mouth, which occurs in about two-thirds of the people who use it. Less-common side effects are drowsiness and a temporary blurring of vision.

Dimenhydrinate and meclizine HCL are popular medications readily available over the counter. They're better known as Dramamine and Bonine, respectively, but you may see generic forms of these two drugs on the shelf in the drug store. Drowsiness is the most-common side effect of these two drugs.

Another prescription-only medication is called "coast guard cocktail", a combination of an anti-histamine and ephedrine; due to recent health concerns over ephedrine in dietary supplements the cocktail is not currently available.

Here are some important things to remember in regard to taking medications. Some medications need to be taken before the trip. Scopolamine patches need to be put on at least 4 hours before getting on the boat. It's also important to take any medication as directed, and to read through the side effects and warnings listed on the packaging before you take it. For example, all of these medications caution against consuming alcohol while taking the drug, and they shouldn't be used if you have problems urinating.

The side-effect profile for each drug is different, and each drug affects each one of us a little differently. I'd recommend that you try a new medication a few days in advance of getting on the boat to see how it affects you; it may not be the one for you. Some scopolamine users wear only half a patch at a time, to lessen side effects. Be sure to talk with your doctor or a pharmacist before you tinker with the recommended dose of any medication.

## Acupressure

Acupressure is a popular alternative to medication. To control nausea and vomiting, pressure is applied to the inside of the wrist by wearing an elastic wristband with bumps on the inside. These bumps touch a pressure point and block nausea signals being sent to the brain. Wristbands are worn on each wrist, and they need to be placed correctly to be effective; directions are included in the packaging. They are available in most drug stores and boating stores.

There is conflicting information as to the effectiveness

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of acupressure. One study compared the wristband to a placebo and found no difference in incidence of motion sickness, but other studies have demonstrated that acupressure can prevent nausea. Birders Alan and Wendy Roedell swear by the wristband. It has worked for them off the West Coast of the U.S., off the Galápagos, and off waters that surely would test even the most robust of constitutions—those in the Antarctic.

There is also an electronic wrist band (called ReliefBand) that uses electronic signals to stimulate the nerves in the wrist. It is believed that these signals mimic natural nerve signals that interfere with nausea messages being sent to the stomach. It was initially designed to help manage morning sickness, but it has now been FDA-approved to treat motion sickness as well.

When Martin Meyers was sick on an overnight trip out of Santa Barbara, California, one of the staff on board came to his aid and placed the wristwatch-like device on his wrist. Two to three minutes later, he was feeling fine and back at the rail again. “Needless to say, I ordered one as soon as I got home,” Meyers relates.

### Herbal remedies

Of the herbal remedies, ginger is by far the most common.

Many people like to snack on gingersnaps and drink ginger ale while on the boat. Ginger root comes in candied, pill, and powdered forms. (One advantage to ginger is that there are no side effects.)

As with acupressure, studies looking at the anti-nausea effectiveness of ginger have been contradictory; some studies show that ginger provides no protection against seasickness; others have shown it to be just as effective as Dramamine. Either way, it's recommended that you start taking the ginger supplements the night before the trip.

The one consistent theme that I've found when talking to people about how they keep from getting seasick is that people find something that keeps them from getting sick offshore and stick with it on subsequent pelagic excursions. Matt Bartel, after getting sick on his first trip, now relies on Dramamine and the wrist band. Conversely, Ted Floyd has found Dramamine to be useless but Bonine to be completely effective. Bill Shelmerdine relies on bonine and ginger ale. Bob Morse doesn't take any chances at all and uses the wristband, scopolamine, and the coast guard cocktail. And one queasily-inclined veteran seabirder, who asked not to be identified, “pops Dramamines until I rattle when I walk, then hop on board.”

Modern medicine, superstition, the placebo effect, and a maybe bit of witchcraft all are techniques that pelagic birders use for managing seasickness.

### Tips to Avoid Seasickness

In addition to the medications, acupressure, and herbal remedies already discussed, here are additional tips to help you avoid the dreaded *mal de mer*.

1. First of all, once you're on board, don't think about getting sick! Seasickness is certainly a physical ailment, but don't underestimate the psychological component. (For example, several times when I sat down to write this piece I got a little woozy and had to go take a break and get some fresh air.) Instead, think about all the great birds you are seeing, or will soon see!

2. Get plenty of sleep the night before the trip.
3. Dress warmly and comfortably, preferably in layers so that you can adjust according to conditions. On summer trips into the Gulf Stream, shorts and sandals may be the norm; but summer trips out on the Pacific Ocean can be quite cool.
4. Stay outside of the cabin, but avoid breathing the diesel fumes. Take deep breaths of fresh air. Look at the horizon.
5. Eat breakfast before you get on the boat. Those big hearty breakfasts sold in waterfront diners smell great, but you would be best to avoid them and stick with something not so greasy.
6. Don't be afraid to snack along the way—you want to avoid having an empty stomach. Bagels, saltines and other crackers, and gingersnaps are good snack choices.
7. Keep in mind that you will use more energy during a day at sea than you would on shore; you will be using energy to help keep warm and to compensate for the movement of the boat.
8. Stay hydrated. Try to drink *at least* as much as you would on a typical day. If you do get sick, make sure to drink plenty of fluids once you feel you can keep them down.
9. Avoid alcohol the night before the trip.
10. Keep yourself occupied! If there isn't a lot of bird activity, talk with the other birders on the boat. Birders are a friendly bunch and most of us would love to talk about birds. Many pelagic tour operators have field guides and reading material on board, but avoid reading while on the boat.

Finally, being well rested and keeping yourself as physically comfortable as possible can make the difference between staying well and getting sick.

Don't let the threat of seasickness keep you from heading offshore. (Unless you're Alan Grenon, who is staying onshore and hoping for a medical breakthrough, all the while working on his eventual publication, *Pelagic Birds from Land*, which he's been researching for three decades.) Talk to your friends about what has worked for them, mind the tips above, put on a wristband or patch, and get on board!

Honest!—it's not all that bad. Take your medication *before* getting on board, munch on light snacks, stay hydrated, keep your eyes to the horizon, think pleasant thoughts, and have a great time. *Monterey Bay, California; October 1998.* © John Sorensen.

