Fla. Field Nat. 22(4): 114-117, 1994.

SIGHTING OF A NORTHERN GANNET IN CUBA

GEORGE E. WALLACE[1,3] AND DONALD R. FILLMAN[2]
[1]*Long Point Bird Observatory, Box 160*
Port Rowan, Ontario, Canada N0E 1M0
[2]*Ontario Region, Canadian Wildlife Service*
Nepean, Ontario, Canada K1A 0H3
[3]Current address: *Division of Biological Sciences, 110 Tucker Hall,*
University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65211

In North America, the Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) is widely distributed in winter, ranging from Massachusetts south along the Atlantic coast and into the Gulf of Mexico (Bent 1922, AOU 1983). Typically, the species is rare in the north, but it occurs regularly off the southeastern Atlantic coast from Virginia through Florida (Bent 1922, Clapp et al. 1982, DeSante and Pyle 1986). In eastern portions of the Gulf of Mexico, including Florida and Alabama, gannets are common (Palmer 1962, Clapp et al. 1982, DeSante and Pyle 1986). Recent sightings have supported speculation by Clapp et al. (1982) that the status of gannets in the Florida Keys is comparable to that of the eastern Gulf of Mexico (W. Hoffman, pers. comm.), although Christmas Bird Count data suggest that their mid-winter occurrence there may be sporadic (e.g., Brown 1987-92). From Mississippi westward through Texas, most sources indicate that gannets are uncommon (Palmer 1962, Clapp et al. 1982, DeSante and Pyle 1986). Fairly large numbers (a total of 303) were discovered by aerial surveys over the continental shelf off the southwestern coast of Louisiana during February 1980. However, it is not clear whether this was an occurrence caused by population increases and a concomitant range shift westward, atypical environmental or human caused events, or whether this region is part of a previously unknown wintering area (Fritts et al. 1983). Gannets have been reported as far south as Veracruz, Mexico (Bent 1922, Hellmayer and Conover 1948).

There are only three reports of Northern Gannets in the West Indies, despite the numbers of wintering gannets in the adjacent waters north of the Gulf Stream and in the Gulf of Mexico, and all are of first-year birds from the Bahama Islands. One was reported from Stirrup Cay, Berry Islands 5-6 January 1984 (Norton 1984, Bond 1986). Two were observed off the east coast of Halls Pond Cay, Exumas 7 May 1988 (Buden and Sprunt 1993). A gannet banded in Québec, Canada in September 1968 was recovered on Grand Bahama in May 1969 (Buden 1991). Although Cuba is included as part of the Northern Gannet's winter range by at least three sources (Bent 1922, AOU 1931, Hellmayer and Conover 1948), the inclusion is questionable. There are no traceable records of the species in Cuba (Bond 1956, 1985), and Cuban authorities have not accepted any records for the Northern Gannet (Garrido and Garcia Montaña 1975). Here, we document the first sighting of the species in Cuba and the first report of an adult for the West Indies.

Beginning on the evening of 24 January 1993, a system of two consecutive cold fronts with strong north and north-westerly winds struck the north coast of Cuba. The second front on 26-27 January was particularly strong with north-northwest winds of 40-55 kph on 27 January in Havana. This created conditions favorable for the occurrence of pelagic species close to shore, and on 27 January Wallace observed one unidentified sulid from the Malecón Boulevard along the Havana waterfront (23° 8′ N, 82° 22′ W). There was general calming and clearing on 28 January, but sea conditions were still rough with swells of approximately 2-3 m. The sky was clear and the winds were from the north-northwest at approximately 25-35 kph. At 0900, looking to the northeast of

the harbor mouth, Wallace spotted a large black and white sulid flying west approximately 1 km offshore and alerted Fillman who was able to locate the bird within a few seconds.

We observed the bird in good light with 10×40 binoculars as it banked lazily three or four times, and agreed it was a Northern Gannet, based on our extensive experience with it and related sulids known to occur in the Caribbean region. The following description is based on field notes made shortly after the sighting. The bird had the characteristic "two-ended" appearance of a gannet with a long bill and long, wedge-shaped tail with the wings equidistant from the head and tail. It was entirely white on the back, breast, belly, rump, tail, secondaries, and upper wing coverts. In sharp contrast, the wing tips (primaries) were black, characteristic of an adult. We were unable to see the yellow-orange flush that adults often have on the head and back of neck. However, we specifically noted that there was no black in the secondaries, thus eliminating the possibility that the bird was a Red-footed (*Sula sula*) or a Masked (*S. dactylatra*) Booby, both of which are known vagrants to Cuba (Garrido and Garcia Montaña 1975) and breed in the Caribbean region (van Halewyn and Norton 1984). The lack of dark coloration on the upperwing coverts, back, and neck eliminated the possibility of it being a Brown Booby (*S. leucogaster*), which breeds in Cuba (Garrido and Garcia Montaña 1975) and is widespread in the Caribbean region (van Halewyn and Norton 1984), or a Blue-footed (*S. nebouxii*) Booby, a species which has never been recorded in the Caribbean (AOU 1983). The flight consisted of long, lazy soaring with deep undulations, without flapping. We also observed two other dark sulids which we were unable to identify. Other species in the vicinity for comparison included Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*), Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*), and Royal Tern (*Sterna maxima*).

This occurrence represents the first report of the Northern Gannet for Cuba and has been acknowledged as such by Cuban authorities (O. Garrido and A. Kirkconnell, pers. comm.). Furthermore, it is the first report of an adult in the West Indies. In the Gulf of Mexico, observations from Pensacola, Florida suggest that juveniles and immatures outnumber adults by as much as 12:1 (Lowery and Newman 1954). Recoveries of banded birds also indicate that juveniles undertake the longest movements and that they and immatures predominate as far south as Florida and the Gulf of Mexico (Nelson 1978a, 1978b). However, 75% of all bird observed during aerial surveys off southwestern Louisiana in February 1980 were adults, but it is not clear if adult gannets were farther south than usual that year due to unusual weather or other environmental conditions (Fritts et al. 1983). Recent sightings in Florida also suggest that adults may be more common than the literature indicates (W. Hoffman, pers. comm.). In any case, most of the data available suggest that adults account for the minority of all individuals in waters of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, making the occurrence of an adult in the West Indies noteworthy.

Northern Gannets are known to frequent inshore waters and are rarely seen further than 300 km offshore in the North Atlantic, where they apparently range east to the western margin of the Gulf Stream (Baker 1947). The paucity of West Indian records suggests that gannets may be restricted to the waters north of the Gulf Stream in the Straits of Florida, which separate Havana from Key West by only 160 km. If the Gulf Stream forms such a strong barrier to the movements of gannets, they are most likely to occur in the West Indies, particularly in Cuban and Bahamian waters, after strong storm systems with north or northwest winds. While these systems are not uncommon, occurrences of gannets may go undetected in the northern Antilles and Bahamas due to the small numbers of resident observers and lack of suitable optics for observing seabirds at long distances. Another interesting circumstance related to this sighting was the major die-off of gannets along the southeast coast of Florida during the winter of 1992-93 (W. Hoffman, pers. comm.). Much of the mortality was apparently caused by starvation, and it is possible that a shortage of prey in waters north of the

Gulf Stream played a role in forcing the gannet south in search of food. We wish to thank the Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnologia, y Medio Ambiente de Cuba, the Canadian Wildlife Service, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Long Point Bird Observatory for making our work in Cuba possible. We also thank Beth Wallace, Wayne Hoffman, and three anonymous reviewers for additional information and helpful comments that improved the manuscript. This is a publication of the Long Point Bird Observatory.

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