

First North Mississippi Record of the Red Phalarope

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The Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicarius) is the most strictly pelagic of the three phalaropes in its migration routes and winter occurrences away from its Arctic nesting grounds. However, the many scattered fall records of the species from throughout the interior of the United States indicate the limited use of an alternative intracontinental southward migration pathway. Imhof (1976) described the Red Phalarope as "regular, sometimes common, in winter in the Gulf of Mexico off the Alabama and Florida coasts." The four records of Red Phalarope in southern Mississippi prior to 1984 came either from Mississippi Sound (1) or from the sewage lagoon complex at Hattiesburg (3), also relatively near the Gulf coast (Gates and Runzo 1978, Moore et al. 1981, L. Gates pers. comm.). Thus, a sighting of a Red Phalarope in the fall of 1984 in Panola County extends the recorded sites of occurrence for this species to include north Mississippi.

On 13 October 1984, I visited a low, wet spot in the bottomlands of the Tallahatchie River about 7.5 km west of Sardis Dam and about 400 m north of Mississippi highway 35. This seasonal wet spot of about 1-1.5 ha, an agricultural field with exposed mud and sparse flattened dead weeds, sometimes provides suitable habitat for spring and fall migrant shorebirds, as well as for ducks during the winter. I approached the area with Mr. and Mrs. Dana Swan, Mr. and Mrs. Gene Knight, and Judy Burkepile, noting the presence of a number of shorebirds. We quickly identified Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus), Common Snipe (Capella gallinago), Lesser Yellowlegs (Tringa flavipes), and Solitary Sandpiper (Tringa solitarius). A Red Phalarope, however, was unfamiliar to all but myself, and I had seen one only once before. We quickly identified the bird as "different" by its paler plumage and its behavior of wading in water up to its belly and/or floating on the water's surface.

The phalarope had solid gray wings and back, a black line through and behind the eye, plus a black cap starting behind the

eye, narrowing to a line down the back of the neck and broadening where it joined the back color. Everywhere else the plumage was starkly white. The dark bill (lighter toward the base) was short and thick, clearly not the needle-like bill of the other two phalarope species. We studied the bird in good light for 30-40 minutes using binoculars and a 60X spotting scope from a distance of about 100 m. We did not see it in flight. All six observers agreed on the identification. I did not find the phalarope at the slough the next afternoon, but photographed the habitat in which the bird was seen (Figure 1). This seemed an unlikely, rather insignificant "puddle" at which to find a rare, pelagic species in Mississippi.

This fifth reported Red Phalarope for Mississippi occurred within the limited range of prior dates - the earliest being 21 September 1983 (Larry and Terrie Gates) and the latest being on 15 October 1980, both at the Hattiesburg site. It is apparent that Mississippi birders should be alert to the possibility of finding the Red Phalarope in September and October.



Figure 1. Habitat in which a Red Phalarope was seen, Panola Co., Mississippi.

Literature Cited

- Gates, L., and J. Runzo. 1978. Red Phalarope in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Miss. Kite 8:2.
- Imhof, T.A. 1976. Alabama birds, 2nd ed. University of Alabama Press, University.
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