

Laughing Gull and Franklin's Gull Records From North Mississippi

W. Marvin Davis

School of Pharmacy
University of Mississippi
University, Mississippi 38677

The past few years have provided new and surprising observations of Laughing (Larus atricilla) and Franklin's (L. pipixcan) gulls at the flood-control reservoirs of north Mississippi. Sightings of both species deviated from the seasonal patterns of occurrence for previous years, and for the first time, both species were found simultaneously at one observation point.

Before January 1983, I had observed Laughing Gulls in inland Mississippi on seven dates in five prior years, always in the spring (from 16 April through 15 May). All records were at Sardis Lake except for one at Enid Lake (27 April 1968). Single birds were seen except for two on 15 May 1982 at Sardis dam. This pattern of seasonal occurrence was broken when I found two adults at Grenada Lake on 29 January 1983, a date when I would have thought Franklin's Gull to be more likely. They were seen among a flock of Ring-billed (L. delawarensis) and Bonaparte's (L. philadelphia) gulls resting on the water just above the dam near the outlet tower. Both individuals spread their wings, briefly enabling a clear view of the wingtips, which showed no white intervening between the black outer primaries and the dark gray of the mantle. The head pattern was that of the winter plumage adult, rather than of the immature. The two individuals were not close together during my 20 minutes of observation. On 4 May 1983, I found two Laughing Gulls at Lower Lake, about 75 m from two Franklin's Gulls (see below).

More recent Laughing Gull records include: (1) an adult at Lower Lake (below the Sardis dam) on 8 May 1984 in the company of 33 Ring-billed Gulls, and (2) three in breeding plumage at Lower Lake on 3 May 1986. These records extend the series of spring occurrences for the species at that locality to include five out of the past eight years.

My three Franklin's Gull records prior to 1983 were all during the fall: an immature on 27 October 1968 at Grenada Lake; 7 adults on 27 November 1972 at Lower Lake between the

outlet channel of Sardis dam and the old channel of the Tallahatchie River; and one adult on 10 December 1972 at Lower Lake. Therefore, I was surprised on the late afternoon of 4 May 1983 to find two Franklin's Gulls in breeding plumage on a sandy peninsula on the south side of Lower Lake. The birds were standing about 25 m from one another among a group of about 100 Ring-billed and 30 Bonaparte's gulls. They were distinguished from Laughing Gulls by their smaller size and by the presence of white in the wingtip, which was detectable while they were standing and was fully confirmed when they flew. Both Franklin's and Laughing gulls were still present on the morning of 5 May. The rate of discharge of water from Sardis Lake had by then increased enough that the exposed sandy area on the south side of Lower Lake was covered. All gulls and terns present were then resting only on the north shore beach. This brought the Laughing and Franklin's gulls near enough to one another to make a direct comparison. The overall smaller size of the Franklin's Gull could be readily noted. The Laughing Gulls seemed clearly to show a greater relative bill-to-head size than that of the Franklin's. Again, it seemed that one could readily detect the white-in-wingtips feature of the Franklin's Gulls, and its absence in the Laughing Gulls, even without their flying or spreading their wings while standing.

More recent Franklin's Gull records include: (1) an adult at Lower Lake on 21 May 1984 in company of eight Ring-billed Gulls, and (2) an immature at Sardis Waterfowl Refuge on 1 November 1984 with a flock of Ring-billed Gulls.

While the migratory habits of Franklin's Gull can certainly account for its occurrence as a spring or fall transient in north Mississippi, the same cannot be said for the Laughing Gull. It is difficult to explain the increased rate of occurrences in this area since 1979. It is noteworthy that the recent "first documented record" of the Laughing Gull in Arkansas was a fall record of one photographed on 13 October 1982, at Lake Millwood (Am. Birds 37:191, 1982).