

First Sighting of the Sooty Shearwater
in Mississippi

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On 2 September 1985, hours after the landfall of Hurricane Elena, I saw a Sooty Shearwater (Puffinus griseus) along Ocean Springs beach, Jackson County, Mississippi. At about 17:30, I was standing on a bridge looking over a second bridge; the bird was about 40 m away, riding updrafts on the far side of the other bridge. I saw it three times for two to four seconds each, through 7 x 35 binoculars. The sky was overcast, and light was diffuse, good for observation. Strong winds (approximately 30-40 knots) were from the south.

The bird had a typical shearwater shape, with long, narrow, swept-back wings, and a cigar-shaped body. It appeared larger than a Laughing Gull (Larus atricilla). The upperparts were dark brownish-gray, except for the median coverts on the upperwing, which were paler and browner. No paleness was observed on the underwings. However, the upperparts were turned toward me most of the time, with only a brief view of the underparts allowed. The wings probably appeared narrower than usual due to extremely abraded flight feathers, which all came down to a sharp point, and were each separated from the others. Feather abrasion may also have caused the pale area on the upperwing coverts, and possibly a lessening of the silvery color of the underwings, making it thus less visible. The bill was long and narrow, with hooked tip and protruding nostrils. The bird alternated rapid, stiff-winged flapping with short glides, in the bounding flight typical of shearwaters. It held its wings in a bowed position during the glides.

Because the Sooty Shearwater is the only large, all-dark shearwater in the Atlantic and its associated waters, there are few species with which to confuse this bird. Duncan and Havad (1980) caution that the Herald Petrel (Pterodroma arminjoniana) be considered in northern Gulf sightings of the Sooty Shearwater. The former species can be ruled out by its different body shape, much shorter and thicker bill, and

different flight behavior during high winds (Harrison 1983). Bulwer's Petrel (Bulweria bulwerii) is a very remote possibility, but it is much smaller than the Sooty Shearwater, with a different body shape, shorter bill, longer tail, and very different flight behavior. I have seen thousands of Sooty Shearwaters in migration off the California coast.

Duncan and Havard (1980) report 13 other sightings of Sooty Shearwaters along the northern Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida. These occurred in every month but February, March, October, and November. This represents the first sighting of this species in the state, as well as the first member of the family Procellariidae recorded in Mississippi.

Literature Cited

- Duncan, C.D., and R. Havard. 1980. Pelagic birds of the northern Gulf of Mexico. *Am. Birds* 34:122-132.
- Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds. An identification guide.* Croom Helm Ltd., Beckenham, England.