

**FIRST RECORD OF SABINE'S GULL
IN OKTIBBEHA COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI,
WITH A REVIEW OF MISSISSIPPI RECORDS**

Terence L. Schiefer

Department of Entomology
Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762-9775

I was birding at Mississippi State University's North Farm sewage lagoon near Starkville in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi on 31 August 2001. It was about noon when I spotted a gull sitting on the water. Looking at it through my scope I quickly realized that it was probably a juvenile Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*). I waited a few minutes until the bird flew, showing its distinctive wing pattern and confirming my suspicions. After driving back to my office on the MSU campus in order to make a few phone calls alerting local birders to the gull's presence, I returned to the North Farm and studied the bird at length for over 30 minutes. I watched the bird through 8 X 30 Nikon binoculars and a 20-60 X Kowa spotting scope at distances between 20 and 100 yards. I returned later in the day at 5:30 PM and watched the bird for another hour. A number of other birders also observed the bird that day, including Philip Barbour, Jamen Berk, Margaret Copeland, Elsie Croft, Mark Goodman, Keith Kimmerle, Marion Schiefer, and Jenny Thompson.

The next day, 1 September, I observed the bird from 9:00-10:00 AM, and it was also seen again that day by Keith Kimmerle and Jenny Thompson. On the third day, 2 September, I watched the bird with my wife Marion from 11:00 AM until noon, and it was seen again by Keith Kimmerle as well. The bird was last seen

on 3 September when I observed the bird from 9:00-9:30 AM. During the entire length of the bird's stay the wind was light from the south. The sky was overcast with the sun only occasionally peeking through the clouds. There was also light to heavy rain much of the time. I attempted to take photographs of the bird through my spotting scope, but unfortunately the camera focused on the lagoon fence rather than the bird. In the one photo that is in focus, the bird is rather distant with the underwing pattern and the outer part of the upperwing visible. Keith Kimmerle also took photographs, but as far as I am aware these photos were never developed. Although I have extensive experience with gull identification, this is only the second Sabine's Gull that I have seen.

The following description of the bird is based entirely on field notes taken on 1 September while the bird was in view. This bird was a small gull, probably a little larger than a Bonaparte's Gull. It had a long neck and small, rounded head giving it a somewhat similar silhouette to a phalarope, although it was obviously a much larger bird. The entire underparts were white, including the throat, foreneck, breast, belly, and undertail coverts. Most of the upperparts were light grayish-brown, including the crown, nape, hindneck, back, and wing coverts. The grayish-brown color was blotchy on the side of the neck and extended onto the side of the breast. The feathers of the wing coverts and back were narrowly edged with dark submarginal bands and buffy-white marginal bands, giving the upperparts a scaly appearance. The tertials were fairly long and tipped with white, the lowest one broadly so. The primaries were black extending well beyond the tip of the tail. The first exposed primary was narrowly edged in white, with the second being even more narrowly edged. The forecrown was white. The face was mostly white, including the entire area in front of the eye and a narrow area above and behind the eye. A dark brown patch on the lower auriculars extended from the lower rear corner of the eye and the back edge of the throat and graded up into the lighter brown crown. The white

from the throat extended slightly up behind the auricular area. The bill was dark, grading toward bluish-gray on the basal third; it was not large, and it lacked a conspicuous gonydeal angle. The eye appeared dark. In flight the bird showed a striking black, white, and brown wing pattern. The outer primaries were black, and the inner part of the wing, from the base of the trailing edge to the bend in the leading edge of the wing, was light grayish-brown, the same color as the back. These colors set off a white triangle occupying the central portion of the wing that extended to the wing's trailing margin. The tail was white and slightly forked with a black sub-terminal band that was widest in the middle, exaggerating the forked appearance. When the tail was spread it appeared slightly rounded. The underwing was mostly white and had a dark stripe corresponding to the edge of the brownish area on the upperwing. This stripe was strongest near the base of the wing's trailing edge. The whitish areas of the underwing below the brownish and blackish areas of the upperwing did not appear to be as bright as the area under the white triangle of the upperwing. The tips of the primaries from below were blackish. In head-on flight profile, the wrist (inner portion) of the wing was rather short and angled slightly up from the body, and the hand (outer portion) of the wing was angled slightly downward. The bird's flight was buoyant but purposeful. It fed by swimming from side to side, almost in phalarope type fashion, picking food from the water surface. The tail end of the bird sat high, so that the undertail coverts were conspicuous as it sat on the water. The bird spent most of its time sitting and feeding on the water, and it would take occasional flights around the lagoon, usually sitting back on the water rather quickly.

Juvenile Sabine's Gulls are quite distinctive, with their bold brown, white, and black upperpart pattern being unique among gulls. Species showing at least a hint of Sabine's Gull's white triangle on the upperwing include juveniles of the following species: Little Gull (*Larus minutus*), Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*), Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), and Red-legged

Kittiwake (*Rissa brevirostris*). All of these species have gray on the upperparts where Sabine's Gull is brown. The first three species also have a bold dark carpal bar crossing the inner upperwing that is lacking in Sabine's Gull. Red-legged Kittiwake lacks the dark tail band that is present on juvenile Sabine's Gull. Although the upperpart pattern is not shown in the one diagnostic photo which is on file with the Mississippi Ornithological Society (MOS), the similar species mentioned above can all be eliminated from consideration based on the tail and underwing pattern. Red-legged Kittiwake and adult gulls lack the black tail band visible in the photo. The underwing pattern of a Sabine's Gull, clearly visible in the photo, is similar to a faint version of its upperwing pattern. Juvenile Little Gull would show a dark bar on the secondaries which are white on the bird in the photo; juvenile Ross's Gull would have the white of the trailing edge of the wing extending across the outer primaries which are entirely dark on the bird in the photo; juvenile Black-legged Kittiwake would have a nearly entirely white underwing, lacking both the darker bar on the inner part of the wing and the entirely dark outer primaries visible on the bird in the photo; and other species of gulls would lack the large, pale triangle in the central part of the wing. The brownish head, which is also visible in the photo, is lacking on all the species similar to Sabine's Gull that are mentioned above.

Sabine's Gull nests in subarctic and arctic areas of both eastern and western hemispheres. In migration the species is mainly pelagic with birds that nest in Alaska and western Canada migrating in fall off the west coasts of North and Central America to winter off western South America, and birds that nest in eastern Canada and Greenland migrating southeast to central Europe and then south to winter off western Africa. Much smaller numbers of Sabine's Gulls migrate directly across interior portions of North America primarily in the fall and especially in western and central North America and the Great Lakes region; it is rare, however, in the southeastern states (Day *et al.* 2001). The species has been

recorded in nearly every state and province in North America (DeSante and Pyle 1986).

There have been eight reports of Sabine's Gull in Mississippi through the end of 2003. These records are listed below with a list of published references and photos for each record and a list of other documentation on file with MOS. Notes that help clarify the status of a record or its documentation are also included. It is hoped that photographs and documentation listed as missing will eventually be located. No attempt is made here to evaluate the quality of the available documentation as scientific evidence supporting these records; that is the province of the Mississippi Bird Records Committee. However, it can be stated that all the records listed below are by credible observers and the available documentation supports their observations. In several instances the birds listed below were reported as "immature." These birds are listed as juveniles, if their description is clearly of a juvenile bird. All Mississippi records are of fall migrants with dates ranging from 14 July to 1 November with most records occurring in September. All records where the age of the bird was reported are of juveniles except for one bird in first summer plumage; an adult bird has never been reported in Mississippi. Five records are from coastal counties with the remaining three records occurring in the northern half of the state. Birds were seen in habitats ranging from small sewage lagoons and catfish ponds to large reservoirs and the open waters of Mississippi Sound. Sabine's Gull could occur in any part of Mississippi on any body of water and should be looked for especially in late summer and early fall. It is of accidental or casual occurrence in Mississippi and is on the Mississippi Bird Records Committee's Review List; therefore all records should be thoroughly documented.

Sabine's Gull records in Mississippi

1) 1 juvenile, 14 July 1964, Harrison County, 3 miles WNW of Ship Island light house, Lovett E. Williams Jr., Bob Skinner, Mac

Myers, Jerry Blackard. **Record cited:** Stewart (1964); Williams, *in* Turcotte (1965); Toups and Jackson (1987); Turcotte and Watts (1999); Peterson (2004). **On file with MOS:** no details on file. **Note:** Stewart (1964) reports this bird as “a perfect-plumaged immature” and therefore it is reported above as a juvenile.

2) 1 in first summer plumage, 9 August 1988, Hancock County, Clermont Harbor beach, Malcolm F. Hodges Jr., Judith Toups, Terence Schiefer. **Published details:** Hodges *et al.* (1990). **Published photo:** (by Hodges) Purrington (1989). **Record cited:** Hodges (1988); Purrington (1989); Turcotte and Watts (1999); Peterson (2004). **On file with MOS:** One diagnostic color slide (Hodges) and Bird Record Card (Hodges). **Note:** This bird was associated with Tropical Storm Beryl. Additional photos (color slides and color and black-and-white prints) mentioned in Hodges (1990) and details referred to on the Bird Record Card are not on file with MOS.

3) 1 juvenile, 24 September 1989, Hancock County, Kiln, Texas Flat Road Catfish Farm, Glenn Ousset, Judith Toups, Dan Carroll. **Record cited:** Purrington (1990); Schiefer (1990); Peterson (2004). **On file with MOS:** Bird Record Cards with details and description (Toups, Ousset). **Note:** This bird was reported in Schiefer (1990) as being in first winter plumage; the description by Toups actually says the bird was “judged to be between juvenile and first winter plumage.” The plumage description is that of a juvenile with no first winter plumage features indicated. For these reasons and the fact that molt to first winter plumage does not normally begin until November (Grant, 1986), this record is herein reported as a juvenile.

4) 1 juvenile, 5-6 September 1993, Harrison County, West Ship Island, Bob Russell, Judith Toups. **Record cited:** Jackson (1994); Schiefer (1994); Peterson (2004). **On file with MOS:** Rare Bird Report (Russell). **Note:** This record is cited in Jackson (1994) as 5-6 October on East Ship Island; these errors were due

to typographical errors in the submitted documentation. Photos reportedly taken by Toups are not on file with MOS.

5) 1 juvenile, 13 September 1998, Lafayette County, Sardis Lake, Coontown Landing, Gene Knight, Shannon Knight, Marvin Davis, Jeff Wilson. **Record cited:** Jackson (1999); Knight (1999). **On file with MOS:** Bird Record Card (Knight) and Rare Bird Report (Knight). **Note:** Photos reportedly taken by Wilson are not on file with MOS.

6) 1 age not reported, 1 November 1998, Harrison Co., Biloxi, Broadwater Marina, Judith Toups. **Record cited:** Peterson (2004). **On file with MOS:** no details on file. **Note:** Peterson lists personal communication from Toups as the source for this record.

7) 1 juvenile, 31 August-3 September 2001, Oktibbeha County, Mississippi State University North Farm sewage lagoon, Terence Schiefer, m.obs. **Published details:** see this article. **Record cited:** Duncan and Duncan (2002); Knight (2002). **On file with MOS:** Bird Record Card (Schiefer), Rare Bird Report (Schiefer), eight poor quality color prints one of which is diagnostic (Schiefer).

8) 1 juvenile, 6 October 2001, Yalobusha County, Grenada Lake, Stephen J. Dinsmore. **Record cited:** Duncan and Duncan (2002). **On file with MOS:** listed in seasonal report (Dinsmore), Rare Bird Report (Dinsmore).

Literature Cited

Day, R.H., I.J. Stenhouse, and H.G. Gilchrist. 2001. Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 593 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. 31 pp.

DeSante, D. and P. Pyle. 1986. *Distributional Checklist of North American Birds. Volume I: United States and Canada*. Artemisia Press, Lee Vining, California. xiii + 442 pp.

Duncan, R.A. and L.C. Duncan. 2002. Central Southern. *North American Birds* 56: 60-64.

Grant, P.J. 1986. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*, 2nd edition. Buteo Books, Vermillion, South Dakota. 352 pp.

Hodges, M.F., Jr. 1988. Birds around the state: December 1987-November 1988. *The Mississippi Kite* 18: 11-37.

Hodges, M.F., Jr., J.A. Toups, and T. Schiefer. 1990. First documented record of Sabine's Gull in Mississippi. *The Mississippi Kite* 20: 4-5.

Jackson, G.D. 1994. Central Southern Region. *American Birds* 48: 117-120.

Jackson, G.D. 1999. Central Southern Region. *North American Birds* 53: 62-66.

Knight, G.C. 1999. Birds around the state: January-December 1998. *The Mississippi Kite* 29: 56-82.

Knight, G.C. 2002. Birds around the state: January-December 2001. *The Mississippi Kite* 32: 6-24.

Peterson, S.J. 2004. COASTBIRDS: Mississippi Coast Bird Migration. Electronic version 7.0. <<http://www.geocities.com/coastbirds/>>

Purrington, R.D. 1989. Central Southern Region. *American Birds* 43: 114-120.

Purrington, R.D. 1990. Central Southern Region. *American Birds* 44: 103-109.

Schiefer, T.L. 1990. Birds around the state: December 1988-December 1989. *The Mississippi Kite* 20: 8-30.

Schiefer, T.L. 1994. Birds around the state: January-December 1993. *The Mississippi Kite* 24: 25-47.

Stewart, J.R., Jr. 1964. Central Southern Region. *Audubon Field Notes* 18: 512-515.

Toups, J.A. and J.A. Jackson. 1987. *Birds and Birding on the Mississippi Coast*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. xvi + 303 pp.

Turcotte, W.H. (ed.). 1965. Banding work on the coast and Gulf Coast notes. *MOS Newsletter* 10: 4-5.

Turcotte, W.H. and D.L. Watts. 1999. *Birds of Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. xv + 455 pp.