

A Red Phalarope in Hattiesburg, Mississippi

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On Sunday, 9 October 1977, we observed a Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicarius) swimming in one of the Hattiesburg Sewage Lagoon ponds. There had been a heavy rain during the night, but the sky started clearing at dawn and a bright sun was shining when we found the phalarope. There was a light to moderate wind blowing from the north.

When we first sighted the bird, it was about 40 m away from us. We were immediately struck by the whiteness of the bird which was not unlike that of a Sanderling in winter plumage. The bird was relatively fearless and eventually swam to within 5 m of us. We observed the bird for 15 to 20 minutes. The following field characteristics were noted. The bird was quite white below, with a uniformly colored pale gray back, and a darker line marking the back edge of the folded wing. We observed the back carefully; it had no streaking or other marks on it of any kind. The bird had a gray stripe along the back of its neck. This stripe split into two parts at the back of the head, forming a "Y" on the top, back part of the head. This gave the bird a distinctly "bald" look on the top of the head. A distinct "Phalarope mark" went through the eye. The bill was not longer than the length of the head at the same level, and it did not have the "needle-thin" appearance of the bills of the Wilson's and the Northern phalarope. The bill was dark, but not jet black. The base of the bill was thicker than the rest of the bill and showed a slight yellow coloration whenever the bird held its head at just the right angle. This is, as far as we know, the first observation of a Red Phalarope in the state of Mississippi.

Black-necked Stilt: a New Breeding Species for Mississippi

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The Black-necked Stilt (Himantopus mexicanus) breeds in North America from Mexico and the southwestern United States east along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts as far as South Carolina (American Ornithologists' Union 1957). Although stilts have nested in Alabama (Imhof 1976) and

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Louisiana (Lowery 1974), there has been no previous report of nesting in Mississippi. Burleigh (1944), in his study of the birds of coastal Mississippi, did not record the species. We note here the occurrence of large numbers of Black-necked Stilts in 1977 near Pascagoula, Mississippi, and describe the first breeding record for the state.

The site of the breeding attempt was a large, dike-enclosed pond located about 1/2 mile west of the Pascagoula River (East Branch) and 1/2 mile south of U.S. Highway 90, just west of the access road to the West Bank Shipyard of Ingalls Shipbuilding. The pond was adjacent to the marshes and intertidal mudflats of the Pascagoula River estuary, and it attracted a wide variety of shorebirds and waterbirds. The pond covered about two-thirds of the enclosure in early May, but shrank steadily until it covered approximately one-sixth of this area by late July. Vegetation within the enclosure consisted largely of glasswort (Salicornia sp.) and occurred chiefly in the higher southeastern part, which was the area chosen for nesting by the stilts.

Although stilts may have occurred and even nested here in former years, the area was infrequently visited by humans before 1977. On 9 April 1977, 28 stilts were counted by L.J.G. Stilts were seen on all subsequent visits up to mid-September 1977, with 4 November and December sightings of 1 or 2 birds. Counts of stilts are summarized in Table 1. The pattern of seasonal occurrence in Alabama is similar to that at Pascagoula, with extreme dates of 23 March and 19 October (Imhof 1976).

The first indication of possible nesting was on 8 May, when WCW observed 2 instances of copulation (possibly involving the same pair). On 3 and 5 June, Judith and Jay Toups observed several birds giving apparent distraction displays, and strongly suspected nesting. On 6 June, WCW found the remains of 2 nests, indicated by groups of broken eggshells, beside a Salicornia patch near the water's edge. A stilt carcass was found near one of the nests, and it appeared that one or both nests had been broken up by a predator - possibly a raccoon (Procyon lotor), as numerous raccoon tracks were seen in the vicinity. About 8 or 10 stilts vigorously gave distraction displays as WCW searched for nests. The eggshells are now in the Mississippi State University collection.

We obtained no further evidence of nesting by the stilts at the large pond, although one or a few birds often seemed agitated by our presence during visits later in the summer. However, on 22 July an active nest was discovered at a small pond on the east side of the Ingalls Shipbuilding access road by Nell Powers, Jim Kisner, Tommy Kisner, and Sandy Whitacre. One stilt was incubating when the nest was found, and soon this bird and its mate both began calling excitedly and swooping at the observers, revealing 3 eggs in the nest. Unfortunately, this nest was not photographed, and we did not learn of this discovery until September.

On 12 August, RPR again visited the large pond, accompanied by visiting birders Van Truan from Pueblo, Colorado and Robert Bradley from Phoenix, Arizona. Truan discovered 2 partly-grown juvenile stilts on the far side of the pond, and they were seen well by all 3 observers. On 14

Table 1. Numbers of Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets recorded at large pond, Pascagoula River marsh

Date	Stilts ¹	Avocets	Observers ²
9 Apr. 1977	28	6	LJG, JR
17 Apr.	13	31	LJG, NP
8 May	15	33	WCW
3 June	18	38	JAT
5 June	25	33	JAT
6 June	15	25	WCW
13 June	30	N.C. ³	RPR
14 June	24	24	JAT
19 June	58	27	RPR, JAT, WCW
29 June	65	29	WCW
30 June	56	29	WCW
19 July	N.C.	14	RPR
22 July	N.C.	0 ⁴	RPR
29 July	14	14 ⁴	RPR, LCC
30 July	16	27 ⁵	RPR, WCW
5 Aug.	N.C.	56	RPR
12 Aug.	22(2)	92	RPR, VAT, RCB
14 Aug.	18(2)	106	RPR
19 Aug.	32(7)	201	RPR, JAT, WCW, LCC
25 Aug.	42	28 ⁴	JAT
26 Aug.	16	216	RPR
27 Aug.	14	251	RPR, JAT
1 Sept.	14	255	RPR
3 Sept.	40	307	LJG, JAT, JI, AB
10 Sept.	37	158	RPR, JAT
17 Sept.	20	65	LJG, WCW
18 Sept.	15(2)	126	WCW
1 Oct.	0	460	LJG, JI, JR
23 Oct.	0	257	JAT
5 Nov.	2	60	JAT
7 Nov.	2	160	JAT
21 Nov.	2	60	JAT
17 Dec.	1	2	LJG

¹Numbers in parentheses are for juvenile birds; these are included in the totals.

²Observers are as follows: AB, Anna Bullard; JAT, Judith A. Toups; JI, John Izral; JR, Joe Runzo; LCC, Leslie C. Cupp; LJG, Larry G. Gates; NP, Nell Powers; RCB, Robert C. Bradley; RPR, Robert P. Russell; VAT, Van A. Truan; WCW, Wayne C. Weber.

³N.C. = not counted.

⁴These counts made at low tide; most avocets were probably feeding on intertidal mudflats rather than in the pond.

⁵Avocets seen on tideflats, not in the pond (low tide).

August, RPR again saw 2 juveniles, and on 19 August, at least 7 juveniles were seen by RPR, JT, WCW, and Leslie Cupp. These 7 juveniles ranged from about half to three-quarters adult size, and we take this as evidence that at least 2 pairs of stilts had nested successfully in the area. Some of these juveniles may have come from the 22 July nest across the road; we feel certain that the early June nestings were unsuccessful, as birds hatched then would have been full-grown by mid-August. At least 2 juveniles were still present on 18 September (WCW); although adult-sized by then, they could still be easily told from adults by their dark grayish rather than jet-black upperparts, conspicuous brownish feather-edges on the back and wings, less distinct head markings, and markedly paler pink legs.

Also of interest was the presence of a group of American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*) throughout the late spring and early summer at the same pond (see avocet counts in Table 1). From May to July, counts of avocets were much more consistent than those of stilts, ranging only from a low of 24 to a high of 38 birds (except for some July visits when the birds were presumably feeding on the tideflats), suggesting that the same individuals stayed all summer. A rapid buildup of avocet numbers began in early August, culminating in a remarkable 460 birds on 1 October (LJG et al.), more than twice the high count of avocets for Alabama. Avocets are known on the northern Gulf Coast mainly as a wintering species, and in fact the first summering avocets in coastal Alabama were recorded only in 1976 (Stewart 1976). The avocets at Pascagoula, although in full breeding plumage in May and June, gave no indication of reproductive behavior. The species has not been known to nest in recent years anywhere east of the Great Plains and coastal Texas.

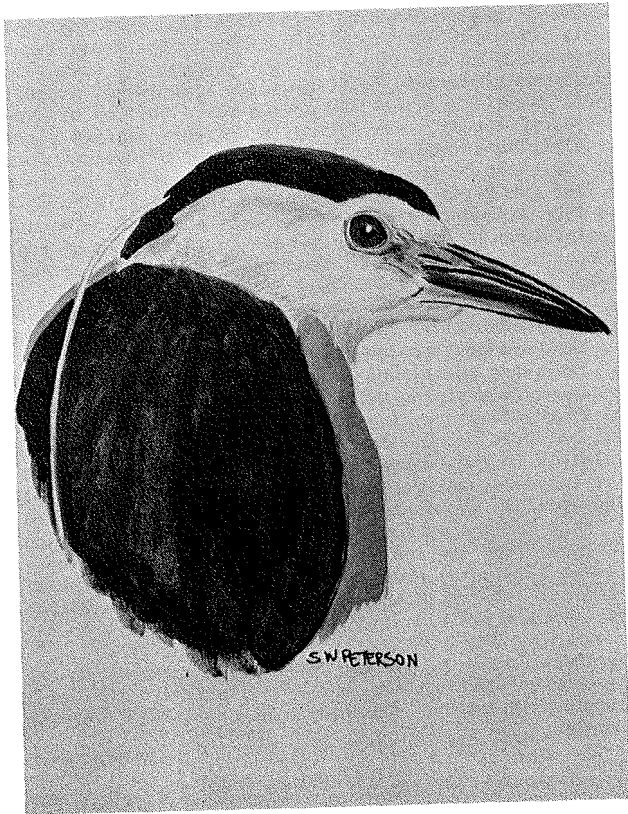
Black-necked Stilts can be considered as semi-colonial breeders. Perhaps the Pascagoula colony is in an early stage of establishment, and most of the birds were young and inexperienced; this, as well as predation and rapidly-dropping water levels, may have contributed to the failure of the first nesting attempt. Certainly not all the birds present attempted to breed. Nesting success of the stilts should be monitored closely in the future. We plan to contact the owners of the property involved, the Jackson County Port Authority, to see whether the breeding area can be maintained in its present condition on a long-term basis. This would give some protection both to the nesting stilts and to the numerous other species which use the area for nesting (e.g. Mottled Ducks, *Anas fulvigula*) or as a migration stopover and feeding area (many shorebirds). With luck, we may find ourselves with a permanent and most welcome addition to Mississippi's list of breeding bird species.

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Black-crowned Night Heron. Painting by Stephen W. Peterson