

## RYNCHOPS NIGRA, THE BLACK SKIMMER: SOME RETURNS AND RECOVERIES

By JOHN A. GILLESPIE

THE New Jersey coast is dotted with innumerable sheltered islets which lie between the mainland and the larger coastal islands, such as Seven Mile Beach, Five Mile Beach, Long Beach, etc. In this region *Rynchops nigra*, the Black Skimmer, is found as a local, but regular summer resident; and, as with all colonizing birds, their nesting-sites are readily determined by the observer who is in a position to detect the line of flight to and from their breeding-grounds.

For the privilege and pleasure of visiting Skimmer colonies during the past eight years the writer is indebted to Mr. Julian K. Potter, who has not only furnished information as to the breeding-localities, but has accompanied him on practically all trips and rendered invaluable assistance—physically, ornithologically, financially, and otherwise. It is generally necessary to use a rowboat to reach the home of the Skimmer, and rowing, at times against wind and tide, is arduous work. Furthermore, while the baby Skimmer flattens out on the bare sand and relies on protective coloration to escape the intruder, human or otherwise, the half-grown bird depends on a pair of sturdy legs, and dashes for the nearest cover, viz. beach grass, dusty miller, boxes, timbers, etc., as the case may be, in or behind which it seeks shelter. The Skimmer is an adroit dodger, and, even when cornered on the open sand by several persons, often darts between one's legs to safety.

It is not the writer's purpose to discuss the home life of this species, since others have already done so, but rather to enumerate the several returns and recoveries of Black Skimmers obtained to date as follows:

Year	Number Banded	Locality	Returns and Recoveries
1923	12	Anglesea, N. J.	0
1924	18	" "	2
1925	10	" "	0
1926	12	" "	1
1927	1	" "	0
1928	21	Brant Beach, N. J.	0
1929	116	Wildwood and Brant Beach	2
1930	100	Brant Beach and Brigantine	2
Total		290	7

RETURNS<sup>1</sup>

<i>Band No.</i>	<i>Date Banded</i>	<i>Locality</i>	<i>Date of Return</i>	<i>Locality</i>
222039	July 20, 1924	Anglesea, N. J.	Aug. 18, 1926	Brigantine, N. J.
222043	July 20, 1924	" "	Aug. 3, 1930	" "

Regarding 222039, details are lacking, since a letter sent to the finder was unanswered. Brigantine is about thirty miles north of Anglesea, the point of banding.

Regarding 222043, this bird was found dead on a small island adjacent to Brigantine. Mr. Potter had discovered a Skimmer breeding colony there a week or two previous, and was with me when the bird was found, half-covered with sand, having been dead a month or two. Doubtless only bird-banders can appreciate the thrill the writer received upon finding, on an island never visited by him previously, one of his own birds, banded six years before.

Note that both of the above returns were found in the same locality. High tides swept over the island at Anglesea, the point of banding, during 1926 and each year subsequently, forcing the birds to breed elsewhere, and it is quite possible that this Anglesea colony moved to the Brigantine region.

RECOVERIES

<i>Band No.</i>	<i>Date Banded</i>	<i>Locality</i>	<i>Date Recovered</i>	<i>Locality</i>
291065	July 25, 1926	Anglesea, N. J.	April 1, 1930	Cocoa, Fla.
535679	July 7, 1929	Wildwood, N. J.	Feb. 11, 1930	Hastings, Fla.
A503468	July 21, 1929	Brant Beach, N. J.	Feb. 2, 1930	Fort Raleigh, N. C.
A519364	Aug. 3, 1930	Brigantine, N. J.	Nov. 8, 1930	Parris Isle, S. C.
A519397	Aug. 3, 1930	Brigantine, N. J.	Dec. 14, 1930	Georgetown, S. C.

Regarding 291065, captured about 860 miles from its banding point and released unharmed, the following letter was received in answer to mine, requesting further details: "In answer to your questions, the bird was hooked in the wing with a fish-hook on a bob that a negro was casting from a bridge across the Indian River here. It happened at about 9 p.m., the negro, seeing the band on the bird's leg, brought it to the store to find out if any one knew anything about it. The Skimmer was apparently unharmed, and, when turned loose, flew away, the band still intact about its leg. If this information is of value to you, we are glad to give it, and hope we

<sup>1</sup>While only two returns have been secured from 290 fledgling Skimmers banded, this small percentage is not surprising when one considers that only dead or crippled birds on the breeding-grounds are apt to furnish evidence of the homing instinct. The trapping of adults at their nests has not been attempted by the writer, and, fortunately for this *protected* species, practically all individuals have migrated South before the gunners (not sportsmen) are afield.

may be able to serve you again in the future." Signed R. S——.

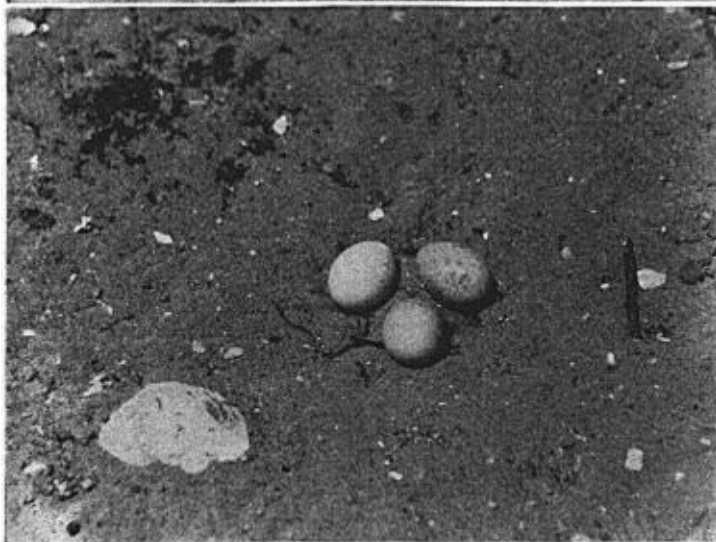
Number 535679 was found dead. The finder of the bird described the plumage as being "white underneath and black on top. Its bill was shaped like a pair of scissors." Complete adult plumage had doubtless been acquired. Hastings is about 730 miles from the banding point.

Details are lacking regarding A503468, since my letter to the finder was returned by the postal authorities.

Number A519364 was shot, and, as is my usual custom, I wrote to Mr. J—— (who proved to be a major) and received his terse reply by return mail, excerpts from which follow: "The receipt of your undated letter (enclosed) is acknowledged. Either the officials of the Biological Survey have gained an erroneous impression from my report, or you have gained one from them. The facts reported by me were as follows: Some marines were shooting on the 8th instant near the south end of Parris Island. A large flock of birds rose from a mud bank just before dark, several of which were shot by the marines in the belief that they were Curlews. The birds were exhibited to me with a request for identification. While talking with the marines I noticed that three of the birds were banded. I removed the bands and sent them to the Biological Survey. . . . The marines were instructed that the birds were not edible and not to shoot any more. There is a flock of about a thousand of these Skimmers in Port Royal Sound which I have seen recently. . . ." Signed: Major H. J——. The Survey notification to me stated, "Reported as shot by H. J——." Had it read, "Reported by H. J—— as shot," the Major would probably not have been unjustly accused of killing the bird.

Naturally I was curious to learn by whom the *other two* birds were banded, when, and where. Further correspondence brought to light that one of the other recoveries, A410448, was banded at Brant Beach, New Jersey, by C. R. Allison on July 7, 1930, about eighteen miles from Brigantine, while the other, A422744, was banded on July 25, 1930, by E. M. Burton, at Cape Romain, South Carolina, some five hundred miles south of the two above-mentioned New Jersey points of banding.

Number A519397 was also killed by a gunner, with whom I communicated, and excerpts from his reply follow: "They were flying in a group of fifty or seventy-five in number . . . in the adult plumage [this in answer to my query describing the immature and adult plumages] . . . we thought they were



BLACK SKIMMER'S NESTS SHOWING NORMALLY COLORED AND  
ALBINO EGGS. McLAUGHLIN ISLAND, BRANT  
BEACH, NEW JERSEY.

Photo by E. Woolman

edible because of the bands . . . they tasted very fishy . . . A519397 was killed also with A422610 from Charleston County, South Carolina. . . .” Signed: G. H. R——. Further investigation proved that A422610 was banded at Cape Romain by Mr. Burton, along with A422744 mentioned above. It is a rather singular coincidence that on two separate occasions a bird banded by him and one banded by the writer should have been killed together.

#### DISCUSSION

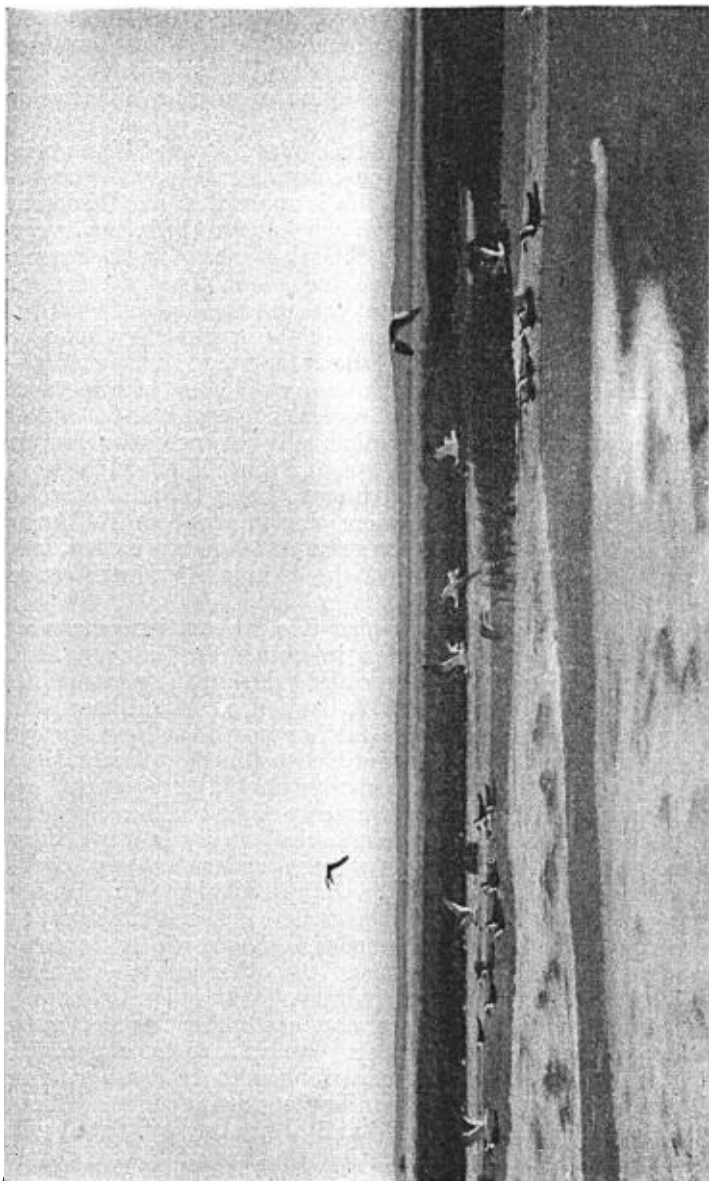
A. C. Bent states<sup>1</sup> that the winter range of this species is “from northern Florida (mouth of St. Johns River) and from the coast of Louisiana southward, all around the Gulf of Mexico, and along the northern and eastern coasts of South America.” Speaking of the fall migration, he says the Skimmer “leaves . . . South Carolina by November 15 at the latest.” Regarding the spring migration, he states it “arrives in South Carolina about the middle of April. . . .”

Data secured from the above-mentioned recoveries do not confirm the northern extremity of the Skimmer’s winter range (as outlined by Mr. Bent), nor the date by which this species leaves South Carolina in the fall. Of the eight recoveries mentioned above, (two of Mr. Burton’s, one of Mr. Allison’s, and five of the writer’s), only two, (291065 and 535679) were recovered south of the St. Johns River. The other six birds all turned up, between November and February inclusive, at points considerably north of this locality, viz., as the crow flies, at distances of 130, 250, and 425 miles, respectively, north of the St. Johns River.<sup>2</sup> It is true, A503468, found at Fort Raleigh, North Carolina, might have been brought northward by coastal currents. Details are lacking as to the method of capture, or whether the bird was dead or alive. Also, A519364, A422744, and A410448 were shot November 8th, a week prior to Bent’s departure date for South Carolina. But note that Major J——’s letter, written November 17th, states, “There is a flock of about a thousand of these Skimmers in Port Royal Sound which I have seen recently.”

Referring again to A519397 and A422610, note they were killed December 14th, a month later than Bent’s departure date, at a point 250 miles north of the St. Johns River. In fact, A422610, banded by Mr. Burton in South Carolina, had

<sup>1</sup>U. S. National Museum Bulletin 113, page 318.

<sup>2</sup>In *Bird-Love*, Vol. XX XIII, p. 49 Earle R. Greene and N. Spratt, Jr., report seeing twelve Skimmers at either Saint Simons Island or Sea Island, Georgia, fifty to sixty miles north of the mouth of the St. Johns River, on December 26, 1930.



BLACK SKIMMERS ON McLAUGHLIN ISLAND SANCTUARY, BRANT BEACH, NEW JERSEY  
Photo by E. Woolman

not (in midwinter) migrated south at all, being recovered about twenty miles north of its banding point. Furthermore, Mr. R— mentions in his letter that on December 14th, when he killed the birds, "they were flying in a group of fifty or seventy-five in number."

Regarding the relative abundance of the Black Skimmer in winter along the South Carolina coast, Mr. Burton, who resides in Charleston, writes me: "It is unusual to see Skimmers in the winter months, although we have records for every month in the year. The first flock arrives about the last week in February." As previously stated, Bent gives the arrival date in South Carolina as "about the middle of April."

Meager as these recoveries are, to the writer they indicate that the Skimmer is extending its winter range slightly northward. Practically extirpated from New Jersey fifteen years ago, owing to encroachments of civilization and lack of federal protection, this species, now universally protected by law, is coming back strongly in this State, and quite likely in the next few years it will be found breeding on Long Island. Since it is generally agreed that it is increasing in numbers from year to year and slowly extending its summer range northward, is it not reasonable to suppose that the Skimmer's winter range would be similarly affected?

In conclusion, I can offer no plausible explanation as to why A422610 and A422744, banded in South Carolina by Mr. Burton, were, when killed, associating during the winter with A410488, A519364, and A519397, banded by Mr. Allison and the writer five hundred miles farther north in New Jersey. Had but one South Carolina bird been killed, it might have indicated a cripple that either was unable to migrate, or, having recovered, had lost all urge to do so. The fact that two South Carolina birds failed to migrate dispels this theory and suggests that these birds were *permanent residents*. It seems logical to assume that a group of birds, supposedly migratory, whose breeding range is five hundred miles south of a second group of the same species, should winter approximately an equal distance south of the other group—particularly with this species, which winters (as previously stated) as far south as "the northern and eastern coasts of South America." Perhaps in this theory we assume too much, for bird migration is too complex a problem to be dealt with in cold figures. Through the banding method, concrete facts accumulated over a long period and accurately tabulated will prove or disprove many migration theories of the past and present.

Glenolden, Pennsylvania, February 7, 1931.