Pelagic birds of the northern Gulf of Mexico

A preliminary summary of distribution and abundance with comments on field identification

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Introduction

THE NORTHERN GULF OF MEXICO remains one of the least understood areas in North America as far as its bird life is concerned. It has been over 25 years since Lowery and Newman (1954) summarized the known distribution of avian species in the Gulf. In the meantime the Gulf has become used extensively as an oil-producing region with the attendant platforms providing a new undersea environment. Changes in the littoral environment from onshore development are also occurring.

Recently, birders have been making the not inconsiderable effort to explore offshore areas and return reliable sight records. Unfortunately, these areas have usually been chosen because of the convenience of their access rather than for their oceanographic features. A full and systematic study of the Gulf waters, comparable perhaps to the Canadian Atlantic studies described in Brown et al. (1975), seems desirable.

In view of the increasing interest nationwide in pelagic birds, and with an eye to establishing baseline data from which changes from a variety of environmental impacts may be measured, we have summarized published and submitted records of oceanic birds in the northern Gulf. We include as well four years of records collected by one of us (RWH). We have made no attempt to evaluate the accuracy of records submitted by others.

Since it is only in the Gulf that certain species (e.g. Gannet and boobies) are regularly sympatric, the standard field guides are often imprecise with respect to their identification. We therefore try to provide a discussion of characteristics which will facilitate field identification of birds seen at sea in the Gulf.

It must be emphasized that this is a preliminary account. Birders are only beginning to explore the Gulf. More than a decade of observations in the region will be required before we begin to understand the occurrence and distribution of these species.

Materials and Methods

Published records from the excellent state references by Oberholser (1974), Lowery (1974), Imhof (1976) and Sprunt (1954, with addendum 1963) have been supplemented with records from the Florida, South Central and South Texas Region reports of American Birds. Bowman’s (1978) “Species Index to Florida Bird Records” has been invaluable in searching that state’s data. Other occurrence reports have been taken from the repository of sight records at the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University (hereafter, L.S.U.), Baton Rouge, or from our own sightings in Alabama waters.

Since Mississippi lacks a recent comprehensive state reference (Burleigh’s 1945 work mentions no pelagics), we cannot consider our coverage complete. We have, however, covered all published sightings in that state from 1974 to the present, as well as the entire sight record file at L.S.U.

Our own observations have been made from the Alabama Department of Conservation’s Marine Resources Lab at Dauphin Island, using a 23-foot open boat fitted with twin 140-hp outboard engines. This craft is eminently stable, provides excellent visibility and photographic opportunities. With these engines it is fast enough (ca. 50-55 mph) in fair seas to chase down most seabirds, although jaegers and sulids routinely outrun us. Alternatively, during 1979 we have sometimes used a 60-foot chartered fishing vessel holding up to forty observers.

Binoculars (7 X 35) with a 300 mm lens on a 35 mm camera constitute the optical gear.

The area considered in this article is the Gulf of Mexico, north of the 26th parallel, (that is, from Port Isabel, Texas to Marco, Florida). The choice of species included is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. Our guiding principle has been to include those birds which spend some portion of their life entirely at sea, and which are not commonly found on land. Thus, Black Tern, a species which we have seen far out in the Gulf, is excluded. Similarly, Wilson’s Phalarope is considered primarily a shorebird and is not included with the pelagic phalaropes.

Definitions

The number of sightings of each species offshore is usually too small to permit true evaluation of populations; we use the following terms:

**Abundance**, in declining sequence: abundant, common, uncommon, rare

**Frequency**, in declining sequence: Regular (every year), irregular, casual, accidental (fewer than five records for the Gulf).

**Seasonality**: noted where known.

A further category — “Historical” refers to species not recorded for at least 25 years.
SPECIES ACCOUNTS

ALBATROSSES: Diomedeidae

Yellow-nosed Albatross (Diomedea chlororhynchos)

Status: Accidental.

Texas — May (1972) and October (1976 — an injured bird) both off S. Padre Island; an unidentified albatross was recorded 120 km off Galveston in November (1976). Louisiana — May (1970 — Cameron Parish).

Field Identification: These are huge seabirds with heavy bills and long, narrow wings, unmistakable at reasonable range. Identification to species, however, can be quite difficult.

Any albatross in the Gulf will most likely be this species or the Black-browed Albatross (Diomedea melanophris). The latter has a pale bill with underwings broadly bordered in black. The Yellow-nosed, despite its name, has a bill which appears dark, the yellow being only on the dorsal ridge. The underwings are narrowly edged in black (scarcey visible on the trailing edge). See McDaniel (1973) or Warham et al. (1974) for further details.

SHEARWATERS: Procellariidae

Cory's Shearwater (Puffinus diomedea)

Status: Regular but rare during Fall in recent years.


Field Identification: See Greater Shearwater, below.

Greater Shearwater (Puffinus gravis)

Status: Regular but uncommon in recent years in the eastern portions of the area.


Sooty Shearwater (Puffinus griseus)

Status: Uncertain; five sightings in the last 3 years.

Texas — April (1951), June (1937, 1952 — both found dead), and July (1976). Louisiana — August (1976 — 110 km offshore along a grass line, 4 birds). Alabama — May (1898 — 450 km inland, dead after a storm, 1979 — RWH, previously unpublished), September (1979, 3 seen by RWH during Hurricane Frederic) and December (1978 — a single bird carefully identified from shore during a Christmas Bird Count). Florida — January (1935 — dead, 1950), April (1951), and September (1978).

Field Identification: A darkish shearwater, typically fuscous on the back, smoke-gray on the belly; a few museum specimens (L.S.U. Museum of Natural Science) have an olive-brown color to the belly. This is probably not noticeable in the field. The silvery wing linings separate it from the large dark Pacific Ocean shearwaters. Lee’s (1979) report of the collection of a South Trinidad Petrel (Pterodroma arminjoniana), off North Carolina and his comment that the bird was originally thought to be a Sooty Shearwater is eye-opening. While unrecorded in the Gulf, the South Trinidad Petrel should be kept in mind when Sooty Shearwaters are recorded (Lee, 1979; R. Rowlett, pers. comm.).

Manx Shearwater (Puffinus puffinus)

Status: Accidental.

Texas — February (1975 — skeletal remains of a bird banded in Scotland (!) during 1973 were found on N. Padre Island).

Field Identification: See Audubon’s Shearwater, below.

Comment: Numerous records from the Atlantic Coast of Florida.

Audubon’s Shearwater (Puffinus iherminieri)

Status: Casual year-round.

Texas — January (1947), February (1979 — 2 birds), March (1975), April (1955, 1964), May (1929), Septem-

Alabama's first Audubon's Shearwater, in flight off Dauphin Island, June 30, 1978. Note the contrast of dark above and light below. The longish tail and dark brown coloring in the wings are also characteristic. Photo/Charles D. Duncan.

Field Identification: Audubon's is a small shearwater entirely dark above and white below. The line of demarcation is sharp at the neck, unlike Manx Shearwater. Audubon's has dark undertail coverts whereas, except for the "black-vented" Pacific race, they are light in the Manx. The present species has a faster wingbeat, proportionately shorter wings and a longer tail than the slightly larger Manx. Little Shearwater (Puffinus assimilis) is smaller even than Audubon's. While unrecorded in the Gulf there have been recent Atlantic Coast reports. Its flight is reminiscent of an alcid, with very rapid whirring wing strokes and a shearwater flutter and glide. The back is essentially black (not rich, dark brown as is Audubon's) and there is more white on the side of the head. Legs and feet are lavender (flesh-colored in Audubon's) and the tail is quite short.

Comment: Of historical interest is Audubon's account, quoted in Bent (1922), of this species. While traveling in the Gulf of Mexico in 1826, Audubon's party found that Audubon's Shearwater, observed "daily since we left the mouth of the Mississippi," became so numerous off the western shores of Florida that the mate killed four with a single shot while collecting specimens. Apparently no such concentrations have been recorded in this century.

Black-capped Petrel (Pterodroma haveita)

Status: Unrecorded with certainty in the Northern Gulf. One of us (RWH) saw a bird generally fitting the characteristics of this species in July (1976) at the 100 fathom curve, 60 km off Orange Beach, Alabama.

Field Identification: Rather like a small Greater Shearwater with more extensive white on the neck and tail and a genuinely black cap. The bird is about the size of a Manx Shearwater which, however, has shorter wings and is all dark above. The observer should be aware of the great rarity of this bird even in its usual range in the Caribbean Sea.

STORM-PETRELS Hydrobatidae

Black-bellied Storm-Petrel (Fregetta tropica)

Status: Accidental and historical.

Florida — a single record at St. Marks in 1851. Seven specimens were captured from a vessel at anchor by using a hook and line (!). The birds were observed around the boat for two days. The total number seen was apparently not reported.

Field Identification: About the size of Leach's Storm-Petrel. The tail is slightly rounded (not forked). The upper parts, head and neck are deep mouse-gray. The underwings, flanks and undertail coverts are white with a dark gray band running from chest to feet dividing the belly lengthwise.

Comment: The St. Marks occurrence is the only North American record of this species, which is normally found in Antarctic waters. It breeds in South Georgia, the South Orkneys and South Shetland Islands. It is common near New Zealand. Shackleton and Stokes (1968) illustrate this species rather handsomely.

Leach's Storm-Petrel (Oceanodroma leucorhoa)

Status: Casual, usually in summer.


Field Identification: See Wilson's and Harcourt's Storm-Petrels.

Harcourt's Storm-Petrel (Oceanodroma castro)

Status: Casual May through October.


Field Identification: Very similar to Leach's. Murphy (1936) states "I have learned no way to distinguish these two in the field." Suggested field marks concern the less forked tail (1/2" or less rather than 3/4" for Leach's); the black tips on white upper tail coverts (subtle but diagnostic) and a white rump unbroken by a longitudinal dark area as in Leach's. (This last mark is mentioned by Oberholser (1974), Pough (1951) and Stokes (1965) but ignored by other field guides.) Murphy (1936) describes the tail of the nominate race of the Atlantic as square; however note the caution about the tail shape below. Oberholser also states that Harcourt's in flight " executes fewer leaps and bounds than does Leach's. It also does not skim or ‘dance’ on the water as habitually as Wilson's." See the photograph in Fisher and Lockley (1954) and discussion below.

Comment: This species is described as the warm water version of the Leach's Storm-Petrel found in the Eastern Atlantic. The authors are surprised that the specimen record should show more of this species than the Leach's. Are we missing sight records because of identification difficulties? More photographs are badly needed before the Hydrobatidae in the Gulf
are understood. We also urge submission of "Oceanodroma sp.?" when Harcourt's cannot be eliminated with certainty.

**Wilson's Storm-Petrel (Oceanites oceanicus)**

*Status:* Regular from April to September; common, sometimes abundant, in the eastern portions of the Gulf.

- **Texas** — April (1961), June (1912), "summer" (1940).

**Field Identification:** Finch et al. (1978) provide an excellent discussion of storm-petrel characters. To summarize, Leach's has long pointed wings sharply bent at the wrist in comparison to the "racquet-like" rounder wings of this species. Leach's is described as sooty-brown while Wilson's is distinctly blacker, a feature accentuating the white rump of the Wilson's. The forked tail of the Leach's is "hard to see and a very poor field mark." When visible, the yellow webs between the toes separate Wilson's from all except the very different White-faced Petrel (Pelagodroma marina) (unrecorded in the Gulf).

For those experienced with the storm-petrels, Leach's flies with a more butterfly-like and erratic flight, suggesting perhaps a nighthawk. Wilson's wing stroke is faster and shallower (more "fluttery").

**Comment:** A bird originally identified as this species inland at Marianna, Florida in September (1975) is now considered to have perhaps been a Harcourt's (how was Leach's eliminated?) and is officially an unidentified storm-petrel. Another unidentified storm-petrel (without a forked tail) was seen in October (1978) at a salt marsh near Wakulla, Florida.

**TROPICBIRDS: Phaethontidae**

**White-tailed Tropicbird (Phaethon lepturus)**

*Status:* Casual, nearly year-round.


**Field Identification:** In full plumage, this species could be confused only with the Red-billed Tropicbird (Phaethon aethereus) which is as yet unrecorded in the Gulf. The two occurrences of *P. aethereus* on the east coast of Florida are considered most unusual.) Kincaid in Oberholser (1974) warns that many individuals lack the long streamer tails and can be easily confused with Royal Terns (Sterna maxima). See Stallcup (1976) for further discussion of tropicbird identification.

**BOOBIES AND GANNETS: Sulidae**

**Blue-faced (Masked) Booby (Sula dactylatra)**

*Status:* Regular, common.

- **Texas** — Over 45 records from January to October, though primarily it seems in the warm weather months (Oberholser, 1974). Eight were found oiled during the Ixtoc I oil spill, August, 1979, C. Sanchez, USFWS, personal communication. **Louisiana** — Sixteen records, from May to September with four sightings in December (three in 10 days in the same waters). **Mississippi** — July 1979, September (1978). **Alabama** — First recorded in 1971, regular, perhaps common, since then. The graph below indicates the seasonal distribution of records published by others and all of our own sightings. **Florida** — March (1976), May (1933 — immature), July (1950 — 2 birds, 1971 — 2 birds, 1979), August (1977, 1978), September (1974, 1977, 1978 — two sightings).

**Field Identification:** The adults pose no difficulty, but immatures require caution. This species is smoke-colored with poorly defined but quite noticeable light areas at the base of the neck and tail. The belly is light and again not sharply defined. The bill, described by Palmer (1962) as slaty in the immatures, is depicted as orange or straw-colored in most field guides. In photographs of Gulf region birds it seems light. First-year Gannets are quite similar and especially confusing as they are often seen in our area while shedding their juvénal plumage (after February). They have an upper back which is generally...
dark (with some white feathers). The head and neck vary individually but change from patchy dark and light to mostly white (Palmer, 1962). The immature Blue-faced [Masked] Booby is distinguished by a broad white patch on the upper back, present when the head and neck are dark, a combination not found in the Gannet. An important mark in all plumages is the feathered “chin” of the Gannet, extending forward of the eye when viewed from the side. This gives the appearance of a rearward-pointing “V” to the posterior portion of the bill. In all boobies, the chin is unfeathered and no such “V” is seen.

Comment: This is certainly the booby of the Northern Gulf, recorded in all months except November. A recent paper by Ortego (1978), suggests that the ecosystem created by off-shore oil rigs is favorable to this species and accounts for its presence in the more western regions of the area. Our experience is that in Alabama this bird can be found within sight of land in summer when warm, clear water moves close to shore. It would be helpful if more observers submitting records mentioned whether the birds they see were in adult or immature plumage. Sanchez, personal communication, estimates that 100 birds were affected by Ixtoc I for every one found. If true, the projected 800 oiled Blue-faced Boobies could represent a significant portion of the species in the Gulf; Boswell (1978) estimated about 2000 Blue-faced Boobies on the Alacran Reef, off Yucatan during September 1975. R. W. Clapp (pers. comm.).

Blue-footed Booby (Sula nebouxii)

_STATUS: Accidental, autumn.

Texas — October (1976 — photographed) on S. Padre Island.

Field Identification: The adults are distinguished by their bright blue feet and dark bill. The underwing coverts are brown (mostly white in Blue-footed Booby). The white collar extends to the back (unlike the Blue-footed Booby immature). In the immatures the fuscous extends across the breast and onto the belly while in the Blue-footed Booby it is confined to the throat (Palmer, 1962). Overall, the adults show less white than the belly of the adult Blue-footed Boobies but immatures show more than immature Blue-footed.

Brown [White-bellied] Booby (Sula leucogaster)

_STATUS: Regular in summer, uncommon to casual, year-round.


Field Identification: Again only the immatures should pose any problem. In this species the dark brown head and sharply demarcated white belly of the adult is suggested in the immature. Yellow feet and lack of white flecking on the dorsal surface eliminate immature Gannet (which in some plumages can have the dark head/flight belly pattern as well). See also Red-footed Booby, below.

Comment: Pough (1951) and Bull and Farrand (1977) both mention this as the most common Gulf booby. Our experience indicates that the Masked Booby is much more likely to be seen.

Red-footed Booby (Sula sula)

_STATUS: Accidental.


Field Identification: A poorly understood species with at least three adult phases: a white phase with black-tipped flight feathers; a brown phase usually but not always with a white tail; and a gray phase. All share the bright red feet and a pale blue bill. The immatures are gray-brown, sometimes with a slightly darker breast and usually with a paler belly. In flight, it is extremely difficult to distinguish from the immature Brown Booby which has somewhat shorter wings. (The wing length for Red-footed Booby given by Tuck and Heinzel, 1978 must surely be in error). When comparison is available, Red-footed Boobies appear to be only about three-fourths the size of Gannet, the only other White-tailed sulid. Murphy (1936) mentions that the rectrices of the Red-footed Booby are distinctly narrower than those of the Brown Booby. [One seen, Dry Tortugas, May 1979 was very decidedly paler than immature Brown Booby, a dull sandy brown, palest on neck and breast — D. W. Finch, pers. comm.]

Red-footed Booby, dark phase adult in flight. [Photographed at Tower Island, Galapagos/Thomas H. Davis.]

Gannet (Morus bassanus)

_STATUS: Common to abundant in winter in the eastern portions of the region, but less so proceeding west.

Texas — "Usually rare and irregular on the upper and central coast; casual on the lower coast," extreme dates September to May according to Oberholser (1974). Louisiana — Lowery (1974) mentions at least 15 records from 1960 to 1974, all in winter. Alabama — common in win-
PHALAROPES: Phalaropodidae

Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicarius)

Status: Casual and rare.

Texas — "Rare along central and lower coasts, casual on upper coast" in fall; casual on central coast in spring according to Oberholser (1974). No mention of offshore sightings. Alabama — Despite several autumn records on the coast or inland, a September (1973 — 6 birds 15 km south of Dauphin Island) sighting is the only pelagic record. Florida — January (1976), March (1918 — 11 birds, 300 km off Tampa), May (1963 — 4 birds, 1972), June (1965), July (1963 — collected), November (1959 — 2 birds).

Field Identification: Even our limited experience with phalaropes in winter plumages convinces us of the inadequacy of the usual guides. Much comment is usually made concerning bill length, Northern’s is thinner and usually (Tuck and Heinzel, 1978; Stout, 1967; Robbins 1966) described as longer. Oberholser (1974), based on specimen measurements, indicates that the Red’s bill is longer. CDD’s measurements of eighteen specimens at the L.S.U. Museum of Natural Science, indicates the average exposed culmen length for females of Red Phalarope. The difference, however, is slight (less than 2 mm) and comparable with the standard deviation of the measurements. We conclude that this is a misleading and unreliable field mark. In neither species is the bill longer than the head, as Palmer (1962) points out. Moreover the Red Phalarope’s bill is often yellow only at the base and appears dark from a distance, a point absent from the field guides. The best marks seem to be the smaller size, more trim appearance and proportionately smaller head of Northern Phalarope in combination with its darker coloration, more obvious white wing stripe and the light stripes on a dark back. Finch et al. (1977) and Stout (1976) provide further details.

Comment: The absence of recent pelagic records is curious in light of Weston’s findings. Nonetheless, at least in Alabama, commercial fishermen have described seeing large numbers of phalarope-like birds in the Gulf in winter.

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JAEGERS: Stercorariidae

Pomarine Jaeger (Stercorarius pomarinus)

**Status:** Regular, uncommon. Williams (1965) considers jaegers as most plentiful during April and November.


**Field Identification:** See summary at the end of this genus.

Parasitic Jaeger (Stercorarius parasiticus)

**Status:** Regular and common during winter, irregular year-round.


**Field Identification:** See summary at the end of this genus.

Long-tailed Jaeger (Stercorarius longicaudus)

**Status:** Casual.


**Field Identification:** See summary at the end of this genus.

**Comment:** Unidentified jaegers have been noted as follows:


**Field Identification of jaegers:** We defer to the greater experience of Finch et al. (1978) and suggest the reader study their comments. Adult birds are readily identifiable based on tail shape. For immatures, size, when compared to nearby gulls and, to the experienced eye, manner of flight are helpful. The Pomarine is said to have a heavy, purposeful stroke while the Parasitic’s is more buoyant. The Pomarine’s wing appears quite broad where it meets the body. Parasitic’s is narrower, more pointed and angular. Plumage characters, according to Finch et al. are ambiguous in the immatures. Separating Parasitics from Long-taileds may not be possible in the field for subadult birds. First-year Parasitics appear somewhat rusty in contrast to the gray of similar Long-taileds.

**Comment:** Pomarine Jaeger seems more common in the western Gulf while Parasitic is most often found off Alabama. The surprising number of unidentified (presumably immature) jaegers off Florida is also interesting. Off the Florida Atlantic Coast Pomarine outnumbers the Parasitic substantially. Williams’ summary of Gulf records lists 85 Parasitic to 43 Pomarine to 6 Long-tailed jaegers. The reader should be aware that Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers occur not just in a light phase and a dark phase but also in many intermediate phases.
**GULLS and TERNs: Laridae**

Black-legged Kittiwake (Rissa tridactyla)

**Status:** Regular and rare in winter, accidental at other seasons.


**Field Identification:** A medium-sized gull, most likely to be confused in our area with the smaller Bonaparte’s Gull (Larus philadelphia) which shares its buoyant flight. Adult Bonaparte’s flashes white wedges on the leading primaries while the present species has “paint-dipped” well-defined black tips on the first few primaries. In immature birds the kittiwake is recognized by a dark collar or “windowed” in contrast to the darker, opaque wings of the Common Tern. The head is rounder and the neck short and thick in flight. Standing birds are seen to have short legs and a slightly longer tail than the Common or Forster’s Tern. See also the following species.

Sabine’s Gull (Xema sabini)

**Status:** Casual.


**Field Identification:** Adults unmistakable. The immature is perhaps similar to the immature Black-legged Kittiwake but has a dark back, a forked tail and flashes much more white in the wings. Sabine’s Gull is smaller than the kittiwake, essentially the same size as Bonaparte’s Gull.

Sooty Tern (Sterna fuscata)

**Status:** Breeds in western portions of the area, casual elsewhere from March to October especially after storms.

**Texas** — Uncommon on spoil banks and islands, nesting irregularly on the central coast, scarce along the lower coast and a rare straggler on the upper coast. **Louisiana** — An uncommon but regular breeder in the Chandeleurs. Lowery (1974) reports birds observed fairly often in offshore waters, as many as 18 individuals being seen on the wing. **Mississippi** — A single nest in June (1976).
Top — adult Sooty Tern, center — immature Sooty Tern, bottom — adult Bridled Tern. Drawing by Tuck Hayward.
Bridled Tern, 50 km off Dauphin Island. The photograph is the first of this species in Alabama. Formerly considered accidental, it is now seen regularly. The white collar on the hindneck, extent of the white forehead beyond the eye and the long tail are useful field marks.

Photos/Charles D. Duncan.

Bridled Terns in Alabama coastal waters, August, 1979.


Field Identification: See following species.

**Bridled Tern (Sterna anaethetus)**

**Status:** Casual before 1976; regular, even common, since then.

Texas — May (1971 near sargassum belt 40 km offshore), September (1961 — twice in three days by different observers). Louisiana — July (1979 — 6 or 7 seen on a pelagic trip off Grand Isle), September (1961 — dead after hurricane Carla, 1965 — City Park Lake, Baton Rouge). Alabama — Previously July (1960 — 160 km offshore), and September (1932 — after a hurricane, 6 seen and a specimen). The authors first found this species near a sargassum line 50 km south of Sand Island Light in June 1978 and another pair 100 km away in July. We recorded this species regularly until September 1978 when our investigations were terminated by weather. During our 1979 investigations, no birds of this species were seen during a single trip in March. We found it regularly from mid-April, with a maximum of 25 birds in a single day during July. Sightings have been as close to shore as 2 km and are always associated with sargassum weed. The largest flock we have observed is 14 birds in June (1979). Florida — April (1938 — dead, 1977 — 3 birds 100 km offshore), June (1965 — 35 km off Panama City), July (1977), August (1950 — 6 birds), September (1976 — 3 birds, 1977 — 7 birds), and December (1945 — the only U.S. winter record?). The records since 1976 are all off Clearwater.

Field Identification: Similar to Sooty Tern in that both have dark backs and light bellies. This species has a distinctly gray-brown back (mottled in the immature) whereas the Sooty’s is truly black. Moreover, a white collar extends completely around the hindneck, separating the cap from the mantle, and the white of the forehead extends beyond the eye in this species. The tail is long and deeply forked in both species, but there is more white in the outer rectrices in Bridled Tern. Bridled Tern’s flight is buoyant, with a quick wingstroke, reminiscent of that of the Black Tern (Chlidonias niger). Tuck and Heinzel (1978) call this the Brown-winged Tern, a useful mnemonic.

The immature Sooty Tern is quite different, dark gray overall with small white splotches on the back and sometimes on the belly. The cap is completely undeveloped.

**Noddy Tern [Brown Noddy] (Anous stolidus)**

**Status:** Casual in summer, usually associated with hurricanes.


Field Identification: A dark bodied tern with wedge-shaped tail and a light gray cap — the reverse of “normal” tern markings. The Black Noddy Tern (sometimes called White-capped Noddy, Anous tenuirostris) is smaller, darker bodied, longer and narrower-billed, and has a whiter cap, but is unrecorded with certainty in the northern Gulf.

Comment: A carefully photographed tern, presumably ill, was seen on Padre Island, Texas in June 1975. Identification as to species was not possible but the bird was either a Noddy Tern or a Black Noddy Tern. Size seemed to indicate the latter (American Birds 29:1004).
AUKS AND RELATIVES: ALCIDAE

Razorbill (Alca torda)

Status: Accidental.

Florida — April (1976) at St. George Island, and May (1979 — an immature male found dead on Santa Rosa Island — K. Arnold, pers. comm.).

Field Identification: One of the largest alcids with an exceptionally deep thick bill and an uplifted tail in the water.

Dowkie (Alle alle)

Status: Accidental and historical.

Florida — A single record — December (1939) at St. Andrews Bay.

Field Identification: A tiny bird with short, chunky body and a very small bill. The flight is described as "buzzy" or "whirring."

Ancient Murrelet (Synthliboramphus antiquus)

Status: Accidental and historical.


Field Identification: A small black and white bird with short pale bill and a white neck contrasting with a black throat.

Comment: Ancient Murrelets are found off the Pacific Coast and sometimes occur as stragglers well inland. In contrast, the preceding two species are birds of the North Atlantic rarely ranging to the Carolinas. Their presence in the Gulf is, simply, astonishing.

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LITERATURE CITED


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