

A Second North American Record for Lesser Frigatebird (*Fregata ariel*)

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Abstract

This paper documents the occurrence of Lesser Frigatebird, formerly Least Frigatebird (*Fregata ariel*), at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan on 11 September 2005. Field separation from other *Fregata* species is discussed, along with notes on the first North American record of the species, from Maine.

Field Encounter

On 11 September 2005, at approximately 1630 EDT, a frigatebird was observed for 20–25 minutes at Southeastern Michigan Raptor Research's (SMRR) principal hawkwatch site at Lake Erie Metropark in Brownstown, Michigan.

The bird was initially seen at the mouth of Brownstown Creek, a small channel that empties into the mouth of the Detroit River. At this point it was some 150 m away from the hawkwatch site. It immediately took an aerial dive at a juvenile Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auratus*) that was swimming in the channel, which caused the cormorant to dive underwater. From there, the bird glided into the channel, bringing it to within 15 m of the observers and some 4–5 m above the surface of the water. Its attention had apparently been drawn to a group of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) that was feeding on baitfish that fishermen had dumped near the park's boat launch close to

the upper end of the channel. Upon reaching the gulls, the frigatebird made a sharp dive into the midst of the group, scattering them. From there, it rose up over the water again and continued to make passes back and forth within the confines of the channel some 15–20 m above the surface. It eventually drifted farther away from the hawkwatch site, staying along the extreme northeastern end of the channel, and continuing on this track until out of view of the observers.

Upon first seeing the bird, we noted that it possessed the typical proportions of a frigatebird, having the classic profile of a large but very slender dark seabird with long, angular, pointed wings, a deeply forked, long tail, and a long, slender, hooked grayish bill. It seemed reasonable to assume it was a Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) and probably would have been recorded as such had had the bird flown off to the east over Lake Erie. Fortunately, the prolonged, close views of the bird permitted study, discussion, and photography.

The bird's plumage was entirely black except for prominent band-like patches of white on the axillaries that extended just onto adjacent areas of the flanks. This feature was striking at all distances, even to the naked eye. The bird's dorsal surface appeared uniformly dark except for slight wear in the greater and median upperwing coverts, which caused them to look just slightly paler than the remiges. The size of the bird could be judged fairly ac-

curately by comparison to the cormorant and the gulls it harassed. We judged it thereby to have a wingspan similar to that of an Osprey (*Pandion haliaeetus*) rather than similar to or greater than that of a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Was this bird an atypical Magnificent Frigatebird, we wondered, or something much more extraordinary? We realized in the field that some research would be required to identify the bird from our notes and photographs (Figures 1–5).

Identification

The relative size and proportions of the frigatebird were considered problematic for Magnificent Frigatebird by several observers and were noted as such in the field. Magnificents have wingspans of about 229–238 cm, similar to or greater than that of a Bald Eagle (200 cm) (Sibley 2000, Harrison 1985). However, it was agreed in the field that the wingspan more closely matched that of Osprey, about 160 cm. Several of the photographs of the bird include Ring-billed Gulls in the same frame (Figure 5) and clearly show that the bird, although obviously larger, does not dwarf the gulls, as one would expect a Magnificent to do in direct comparison. Although the relative size of a flying bird can be difficult to judge (something we recognize daily in identifying sometimes distant raptors), a difference of ca. 40 cm (or 20%) should be noticeable in the field when a bird is seen at relatively close range. Moreover, the frigatebird's size and very slender build struck us as diminutive, in comparison with other species present, in comparison with species we see routinely (at diverse distances and altitudes), and against our expectations of, and experiences with, Magnificent Frigatebird elsewhere.

As is true of many bird taxa, frigatebirds (*Fregata*) are more easily identified when the age and sex of the bird are known. James (2004) notes that plumage differences related to age/sex within a frigatebird species are often more dissimilar than they are to the corresponding plumages of other species. In order to age and sex a frigatebird, it is important to note the arrangement and placement of white or pale areas in the plumage as well as the prominence of upperwing "alar bars" (or carpal bars)—contrastingly tawny coverts



Figure 1. Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan, 11 September 2005. In this view of the upperparts, note the absence of a prominent alar bar. Photograph by Paul Cypher.



Figure 2. Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan, 11 September 2005. The all-black head and breast and crisp white axillary spur are clearly visible in this image; this combination indicates an adult male Lesser Frigatebird. Photograph by Paul Cypher.

that cross the wing diagonally from the carpal joint to the humerals or tertials. In the case of the Michigan frigatebird, we were able to rule out immature and female frigatebirds of all species, as these typically have prominent white or buff areas in their plumage and well-defined alar bars. The lack of any white areas on the Michigan bird (other than the obvious axillary spurs) and the lack of any pronounced alar bar on the dorsal surface of the wings rule out all combinations of age and sex except adult male.

Adult males of several species of *Fregata* can be ruled out, based on plumage characters. Christmas Island Frigatebird (*F. andrewsi*) has fairly prominent alar bars and has an oval of white on the belly in all plumages; additionally, some adult males also possess white axillary spurs. Great Frigatebird (*F. minor*) can be ruled out as well: it has prominent alar bars never shows crisp white axillary spurs. As far as is known, there is no record of an adult male Magnificent Frigatebird with distinct axillary spurs or pronounced alar bars, and so that species should be ruled out on plumage; a partially leucistic adult male Magnificent probably would not show such a distinctive pattern. Ascension Frigatebird (*F. aquila*) has white axillaries at younger stages of development but does not show this trait in adult males. Only adult male Lesser Frigatebird (*F. ariel*) has the combination of characters shown by the Michigan frigatebird. The wingspan of Lesser Frigatebird (184 cm; Harrison 1985) also nearly matches that of Osprey, the species we identified as most closely approximating the wingspan of the Michigan frigatebird.

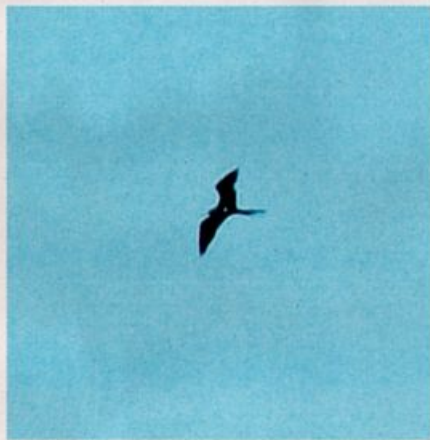


Figure 3. Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan, 11 September 2005. Another view of ventral and cephalic features. Photograph by Paul Cypher.

Discussion

The Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark was undoubtedly transported there in part by powerful Hurricane *Katrina*, the remnants of which crossed to the south of the area just days before. However, this only explains part of the bird's journey; its presence in the North Atlantic would already be highly unusual. In the western Pacific Ocean basin, the species is known to stray quite far north, to Japan and even Siberia (Marchant and Higgins 1990), but such records are few, and not all can be linked to tropical storm activity.

There is one previous record of Lesser Frigatebird for North America. On 3 July 1960, Bertram Leadbetter of Beverly, Massachusetts, took a 16mm motion picture of a frigatebird at Deer Isle, Hancock County, Maine. Alexander Wetmore later confirmed the frigatebird as an adult male Lesser by examining specimens at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology and through frame-by-frame analysis of the film footage, from which several photographs were made of the clearest frames. (These images are said to be in the archives of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts; the archives were under renovation when we inquired in autumn 2005.) Although the description (Snyder 1961) of the frigatebird is somewhat incomplete—as it refers more to a well-defined white area on the side of the bird rather than to an axillary spur—and although the film and photographs have not been examined recently (and have yet to be reviewed by the Maine Bird Records Committee; Louis R. Bevier, pers. comm.), the Maine frigatebird



Figure 4. Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan, 11 September 2005. Photograph by Paul Cypher.

has been included by the American Ornithologists' Union (1998) and the American Birding Association (2002) on their official checklists as an adult male Lesser Frigatebird.

Acknowledgments

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Figure 5. Lesser Frigatebird at Lake Erie Metropark, Wayne County, Michigan, 11 September 2005. At times, observers had the opportunity to compare the frigatebird with other species. It was clearly larger than Ring-billed Gulls it harassed, but it did not dwarf them. The fact that the gull closest to the frigatebird is in focus in this photograph indicates that their sizes relative to one another are actual rather than artefactual. Photograph by Paul Cypher.