

NOTES

BLACK SKIMMERS AT THE SALTON SEA, CALIFORNIA

On the morning of 3 July 1968 Suffel discovered five Black Skimmers *Rynchops nigra* near the mouth of the Whitewater River at the north end of the Salton Sea. The distinctive black-tipped red bill, with the lower mandible extending well beyond the tip of the upper mandible, made the birds easily recognizable as skimmers, and the uniform black upperparts and white underparts made them identifiable as adult Black Skimmers. It was evident that four of the birds were one size, and the fifth was noticeably smaller. Measurements given by Ridgway (1919) indicate females are appreciably smaller than males, so it would appear that four males and one female were involved. They spent most of their time resting as a group on the exposed sand and mud along the edge of the water. Occasionally one or more of the birds would leave the group to fly low over the water with the lower mandible cutting the surface in typical skimmer fashion. Later that same afternoon all five skimmers were still present, and were studied by McCaskie. They were associating with the gulls and terns, and were staying as a group amongst them, and flew only when the mass of birds were disturbed. One was collected, and is now deposited in the Los Angeles County Museum (#76788) where it was determined to be an adult male with slightly enlarged testes (22 X 7 mm, 15 x 6 mm), having a small amount of fat (wt. 399 grams), and showing some signs of molt. The remaining four birds stayed in the vicinity until 5 July, and were seen by numerous observers including Alan Craig, Eugene A. Cardiff, and Clifford R. Lyons.

On 12 July 1969 McCaskie, Eugene A. Cardiff, and three others found two adult Black Skimmers at Salton City on the west shore of the Salton Sea. These birds were associating with a flock of gulls loafing on a sandbar that isolated a large shallow lagoon from the main body of the sea. The skimmers rested on the sandbar most of the time, but did fly around over the lagoon, skimming the surface of the water with the tip of the lower mandible submerged in the water, on one or two occasions. When at rest, these birds appeared very elongated, for the wings protruded far beyond the tail, the legs were very short, the neck appeared squat, and the bill was long and flattened vertically. In flight the wing beat appeared slow, and when the birds were "skimming" the wings were held entirely above the plane of the body, with the low point of the wing stroke staying above the level of the back. The wings appeared long and broad for a bird of this body size. The following description was taken:

Upperparts: forehead white; crown, side of head to below eye, nape, back and rump coal black. Tail: center feathers black; outer feathers white. Wings: upper side black with broad white bar along trailing edge of secondaries; under sides white shading to black on primaries. Underparts: chin, throat, breast, belly and under tail coverts pure white. Soft parts: eye black; bill bright red for basal half and black at tip, the lower mandible appreciably longer than the upper mandible; legs and feet red.

On 17 May 1970 Eugene A. Cardiff found and collected a Black Skimmer at the mouth of the Whitewater River on the Salton Sea. This area was carefully checked that morning, and there was no skimmer then, but in the afternoon it was most obvious, and may have arrived that day. This bird was

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found to be an adult male in heavy molt, and is now deposited in the San Bernardino County Museum (#4531).

Small (1963) cites the only other record of a Black Skimmer in California: one found at the mouth of the Santa Ana River, Orange County, on 8 September 1962. Theodore Chandik (pers. comm.), who discovered this bird, recalls it was resting on a sand bar with Elegant Terns *Thalasseus elegans* and other seabirds. He was able to study the bird at fairly close range, and remembers it appeared shorter than the accompanying terns; he did not wait to see it in flight. He believes the bird was adult since it was strikingly marked black above, white below, and had a brightly colored red bill with black tip. Unfortunately no notes were taken at the time of observation.

Hubbard (1970) states that a record of an immature seen at Lake McMillan on the Pecos River in New Mexico on 5 and 7 August 1964 (Snider, 1964) is probably correct. This is the only other record in the southwestern United States; however, this individual most likely wandered from the Gulf of Mexico by following the Rio Grande upstream.

At the northern limit of the breeding range on the Atlantic seaboard the Black Skimmer arrives late in the spring. Bull (1964) indicates it is rare in the New York region before mid May, and gives 11 June as the earliest date for eggs. Godfrey (1966) cites the records for the east coast of Canada, well to the north of the species breeding range, and all are for the August - October period; he also comments that they arrive there as a result of hurricanes. Birds at the northern limit of their breeding range on the Pacific coast would be expected to arrive late in the spring, and start nesting in June. Any individuals pushing farther north in the process of extending their breeding range, or "over-shooting" on spring migration, would be expected to appear in the early summer (late May to early July), and would have to be adults. Birds dispersing northward after breeding would be expected to appear in the late summer and early fall (August to October), and would involve a high percentage of immatures.

The Black Skimmer is a rather scarce and local summer visitor in the Gulf of California. Van Rossem (1945) cites a specimen from Algodones Lagoon (1 May 1930), and another from Guasimas Lagoon (12 May 1930) as the northernmost records for the coast of Sonora. Alden (1969) indicates it is a common summer visitor at Guaymas, and also indicates it has occurred as far north as Puerto Penasco (no details concerning this record). The species is unrecorded along the west shore of the Gulf of California, and is also unknown from the Pacific side of Baja California.

Black Skimmers have now appeared on the Salton Sea, no more than a landlocked portion of the Gulf of California, in three successive years. Each time the birds have occurred in the early summer, and all have been adults. One of the records involved a flock of five, and another was of two. Their appearances here look to be more than accidental, and it is possible the species is attempting to extend its range northward in the Gulf of California. There are suitable nesting sites on the Salton Sea, and the species may attempt to breed there if left unmolested.

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- Guy McCaskie, San Diego Natural History Museum, Balboa Park, San Diego, California 92112, and Shumway Suffel, 1105 North Holliston Avenue, Pasadena, California 91104.



A group of five Black Skimmers *Rynchops nigra* with a congregation of gulls and terns at the north end of the Salton Sea, California, on 3 July 1968. The small female is the second from the right. Also of interest are three immature Brown Pelicans *Pelecanus occidentalis* visible in the background.

Photo by Shumway Suffel