

FIRST RECORD OF THE BLUE-FACED BOOBY FROM THE PACIFIC COAST OF THE UNITED STATES

DAVID B. LEWIS and W. BRECK TYLER, Center for Coastal Marine Studies,
University of California, Santa Cruz, California 95064

On 10 January 1977, while conducting marine bird and mammal surveys in the Southern California Bight, we observed a Blue-faced Booby (*Sula dactylatra*). To our knowledge this represents the first record of this species from the Pacific coast of the United States. All other Blue-faced Booby records over coastal waters of the U.S. are from the southern Atlantic coast and along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico (Palmer 1975).

Late in the afternoon of 10 January our vessel, the *Kona Princess*, was proceeding northeast from Bishop Rock (Cortés Bank) as part of bimonthly transect surveys of the Southern California Bight (Briggs et al. 1976). At 1645 our position was approximately 32°37.5'N, 118°44'W, some 35 km southwest of the south end of San Clemente Island. Four observers (D.B.L., W.B.T., David H. Dettman and Mark O. Pierson) were recording bird and mammal sighting data from the flying bridge 6 m above sea level. The booby was first sighted about 75 m away, approaching from the northeast, flying low over the water. It drew to within 20 m, circled the boat once at close range, then followed briefly over the wake. It then proceeded along the starboard side to within 3 m of the observers and finally departed back to the northeast. During its 3 minute visit the booby was seen clearly by the four observers, all of whom were equipped with 7x35 mm binoculars.

We compiled the following description of the bird from all four observers: a very large robust white and black bird; face (mask), scapular tips and flight feathers (primaries, secondaries, rectrices) black or very dark; head, neck, body and most wing and tail coverts white. Total length was estimated at 85-90 cm. The greenish yellow bill was long and pointed, with a stout base. The legs were dull greenish blue. We did not note eye color, and no photographs were taken.

The very similar light morph Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*; dark-tailed form) has red feet, a bluish bill with pink-flesh base, and no mask. Huber and Lewis (MS) recently documented the separate occurrences of two Red-footed Boobies on South Farallon Island during summer and autumn 1975, one of which was a light morph, dark-tailed bird. The Blue-footed Booby (*S. nebouxii*), occasionally seen in southern California, has a dark mantle and bill, and bright chalk blue feet. The Brown Booby (*S. leucogaster*), also rarely reported from southern California, has all dark upperparts including the entire head and neck. Gannets (*Morus* spp.), with white secondaries and yellowish heads, are birds of the Atlantic Ocean and the southern hemisphere.

The Blue-faced Booby is a cosmopolitan resident of tropical marine waters. As is typical of tropical members of the Sulidae, it is nonmigratory. Although adult birds prefer to forage well offshore, they do not actually disperse after the breeding season (Palmer 1975). Five subspecies of *Sula dactylatra* are currently delineated as follows: *dactylatra* from the western Atlantic, *californica* from the Pacific coast of Mexico and Central America, *granti* from the Pacific coast of South America, including the Galapagos archipelago (although the latter two forms are probably not validly separable; J. B. Nelson pers. comm.), *melanops* from the Indian Ocean and *personata* from the central Pacific, including the Hawaiian Islands (Palmer 1975, Nelson 1978; but see also Rothschild 1915, Matthews 1921, Murphy 1936). Morphological differences between these races include soft parts coloration (bill, legs, mask, iris), size and shape of bill, and overall body size. However, since variations occurring with age, sex and season are poorly documented, race determination by soft part coloration is potentially unreliable.

NOTES

The task of determining the origin of this Blue-faced Booby is therefore a difficult one. Of the five subspecies only *californica* exhibits a geographic range proximal to southern California. Birds of this race breed on Alijos Rocks, situated 265 km off the west coast of Baja California and just 875 km south of the U.S.-Mexico border (R. L. Pitman pers. comm.). This sighting might be attributed to the *personata* race of the mid-Pacific (and Hawaiian Islands). Though the nearest nesting sites are 4000 km away, that is not considered an extreme range for a sulid. Also, considerable shipping traffic transits between the Hawaiian Islands and southern California, and sulids are well-documented shipboard hitch-hikers (Huber and Lewis MS). Furthermore, the physical characteristics described for *personata* agree well with those of our sighting. Atlantic coast records are of the nominate race, but this and the remaining races can be discounted on the basis of distant geography and/or characteristic physical differences as noted. Therefore, we believe our Blue-faced Booby to be probably the Mexican *S. d. californica* or possibly the Hawaiian *S. d. personata*.

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