

NOTES

BLACK SKIMMER OCCURRENCES IN NEW MEXICO, INCLUDING A HIGH ELEVATION RECORD

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On the morning of 12 May 2007, W. H. Howe and M. D. Howe discovered an adult Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) resting in the company of other waterbirds on the shore of Heron Lake, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico, and obtained photographs and videotape to document the record (Figure 1). During 35 minutes of observation (15:10–15:45), the skimmer remained on the shore with the other birds; two hours later, upon their return to the site, the Howes noted a vehicle parked close to where the birds had been and all birds were gone. The skimmer was not seen again despite searches the next morning by D. J. Krueper and J. M. Ruth. Heron Lake, at 2192 m, is situated in the San Juan Mountains of north-central New Mexico and is only some 50 km east of the continental divide; it is in the Chama River valley, a part of the Rio Grande drainage. The Heron Lake skimmer appears to represent an altitude record for the species in the United States and Canada, eclipsing another adult at 2092 m in Colorado's San Juan Mountains at Pastorius Lake near Durango, La Plata County, 29 April 2004 (*N. Am. Birds* 58:406). For North America generally, these are approached or matched only by records from the interior highlands of Mexico, including ones to 2000 m in the state of Durango and about 2200 m in the Valley of Mexico (Williams 1982). For the species as a whole, however, no North American record tops those from South America, at 3900 m on the Bolivian altiplano (Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990).

There are five previous records of the Black Skimmer for New Mexico, four of them documented by photograph or specimen and the fifth by adequate written



Figure 1. Adult Black Skimmer at Heron Lake, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico, on 12 May 2007.

Photo by Marilyn D. Howe

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details. These are: (1) an immature at Lake McMillan (elev. 1000 m), Eddy County, 5–7 August 1964 (R. C. Brummett; *Audubon Field Notes* 18:527); (2) an adult at Elephant Butte Lake (elev. 1355 m), Sierra County, 1 May 1993 (photograph by L. P. Gorbet in *Am. Birds* 47:441); (3) an adult at Morgan Lake (elev. 1623 m), San Juan County, 15 May 1996 (photograph by T. Reeves in *Field Notes* 50:316); (4) an adult at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge (elev. 1067 m), Chaves County, 10–11 June 2001 (photographs by W. H. Howe and J. R. Oldenettel; *N. Am. Birds* 55:468); and (5) an immature at Stein's Pass (elev. 1286 m), Hidalgo County, 18 October 2005 (salvaged specimen at Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, MSB 25152). Three of these are from east of the continental divide, with two in the Pecos River valley and one in the Rio Grande valley, and two are west of the divide, with one each in the San Juan River and the Gila River basins.

New Mexico lies roughly equidistant from large Black Skimmer populations on the Texas coast and smaller but still significant populations from the Gulf of California to southern California, and skimmers that reach New Mexico could originate from either coast. One, however, was of known origin: the immature salvaged at Stein's Pass, very near the Arizona line, had been banded as a chick at Salton Sea, California, 19 August 2005 by K. C. Molina (*N. Am. Birds* 60:113). Remarkably, another chick banded there that day likewise wandered inland and was found along the Gila River at Gillespie Dam, Maricopa County, Arizona, 16–19 September 2005, where it was identified from photographs of the alphanumeric code on its band (*N. Am. Birds* 60:117).

Inland occurrences of the Black Skimmer are always newsworthy, but the causes of such events are not always clear. Many individuals are believed to be storm-blown, and some inland records in the U.S. and Canada are clearly attributable to tropical storms during the late summer/early fall period of such weather disturbances; the single immatures that reached New Mexico in August and October may fit that pattern. The other four New Mexico records, however, are for May and early June, and all of those were of alternate-plumaged adults. Given that northerly breeding Black Skimmers on both coasts are migratory, strongly so in the eastern U.S. (Gochfeld and Burger 1994), somewhat less so in the western U.S. (Collins and Garrett 1996, Molina 1996), we suspect the spring adults that reach New Mexico more likely represent misdirected migrants rather than storm-driven refugees.

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