

BLACK-HEADED GULL ON THE ALABAMA COAST

Thomas A. Imhof

On the clear morning of Thursday, March 30, 1978, at about 7:15, I was scanning the Gulf at Fort Morgan Beach with my 30x B&L spotting scope. About one-quarter mile to the west in perfect light were two large loosely-assembled flocks of Laughing and Bonaparte's Gulls. Almost immediately I spotted in the Laughing Gull flock a bird with Bonaparte's wing markings. This bird, it soon developed, had the same size, flight and feeding behavior of a Laughing Gull but did not dip daintily or flutter as does the Bonaparte's. Further it showed an all-white tail, dark but noticeably reddish bill and legs, and dark on the underside of the primaries as in the Caspian Tern. Behind the eye was a dark smudge. The bird was identified as a winter adult Black-headed Gull (Larus ridibundus)--ridibundus means laughing in Latin. The bird was followed with the 30x scope for at least five minutes in perfect light until lost in the crowd. Although several observers searched for the bird in the subsequent week, none looked early in the morning when the sun afforded perfect light on the thousands of gulls and terns that feed just east of the entrance to Mobile Bay. It was not seen again.

In Europe in 1944-45 I saw the Black-headed Gull many times and was impressed with its similarity in size and flight to a Laughing Gull. However, most American field guides liken it to a Bonaparte's, probably because it usually occurs with Bonaparte's on the North Atlantic Coast where Laughing Gulls seldom occur in flocks in winter. The Black-headed Gull has become increasingly common from Newfoundland to Maryland and even farther south on the Atlantic coast. With recent records on both coasts of Florida and even inland in Mississippi, it is to be expected on the northern Gulf coast. This record places the species only on the hypothetical list for Alabama. Those seeking to substantiate this record with further sight records or photographic evidence should read the field guides, especially the European ones, carefully as I did. Then, between November and April, its period of occurrence in Maryland, look for a Laughing Gull that has Bonaparte's wing markings.

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BROWN PELICANS REPORTED AT EUFAULA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Brent Ortego

Prior to 1957, the Brown Pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis) was abundant during the whole year on the Alabama Gulf coast. It frequented all saltwater habitats and occasionally occurred inland over the coastal plains of Alabama after winter storms. From 1959 to 1963, no Brown Pelicans were reported in Alabama. In 1973, these birds were again observed in numbers higher than 100 (Imhof, 1976. Alabama Birds: 62).

During early November, 1977, a University of Georgia wildlife student reported that he observed a Brown Pelican flying low over the Chattahoochee River at Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge. At first I was highly skeptical of this report because there has not been an inland sighting of this species

in Alabama since 1922 (Imhof, 1976). The student stated that he had observed Brown Pelicans along the Alabama coast before and was positive of his identification. His only description, "It looked like a Brown Pelican," was not very convincing. I made a special search of the refuge later that day but found no pelican. At that time, I passed off the observation as a misidentification of a Great Blue Heron (Ardea herodias) which sometimes has a silhouette similar to a pelican.

In late March, 1978, I heard second-hand that Brown Pelicans were sighted at Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge by a former Auburn University student. She was an experienced observer, but I have not been able to contact her since then to get her details. I was at the refuge while her observations were made, but, even though I had searched all suitable habitats for waterbirds, I did not observe any pelicans.

During April 15, 1978, I had searched most of Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge for Canada Goose (Branta canadensis) nests without sighting any pelicans and was returning to the boat dock at 5:00 p.m. when I observed an immature Brown Pelican gliding N 10 meters over the Chattahoochee River from an area previously searched. The less than 1-meter long bird had a brown neck, back and wings with a white belly. The large dark beak was less than 3 decimeters long with a blunt slightly hooked tip. No feet were observed extending beyond the tail. The neck was retracted with the head held above the plane of the body and the beak pointing noticeably downward. The bird turned near the refuge boat dock and landed in one of the open sloughs adjacent to the river. It swam in the area for an hour and departed in a southerly direction.

It is possible that the first two sightings were correct, even though I do not have access to any satisfactory details. The observers have had experience at identifying this species, and a Brown Pelican would be hard to misidentify.

If the other Brown Pelicans reported behaved in a similar manner to the one I observed, it explains why I did not observe them. It requires me 10 hours to search all of ENWR by boat. If a large water bird is at one place on the refuge for an hour or less during one of my surveys, I might easily miss it. If a large bird flies low north or south through the refuge, it would probably pass by me and be observed on most occasions.

During the days of the reported pelican sightings, there were 24 - 40-kilometer/hour NW winds which would seemingly discourage 160-kilometer northward movements by coastal birds. Each observation occurred two to three days after statewide thunderstorm activity. It is possible that the storms initiated abnormal trips by the Brown Pelicans, and that the birds remained inland for several days until they got reoriented as to the location of the coast.

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RUFFED GROUSE IN NORTHWEST ALABAMA

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On February 12, 1978, at about 4:00 p.m., we flushed two Ruffed Grouse (Bonasa umbellus) from corn stubble in northeastern Tuscaloosa County, north of Little Tyro Creek and west of Sandtown (Section 5, Township 17 S, Range 9 W). The field in which the birds were foraging was about two acres in size and was nearly half a mile from the nearest public road. The field was completely surrounded by second growth pines (Pinus virginiana and P. taeda) and was on a ridge in very steep terrain.

Imhof (1976, Alabama Birds, University of Alabama Press, University) considers the Ruffed Grouse rare in northeast Alabama and mentions that 65 Ohio birds were released in the Bankhead National Forest in 1958. The species was last reported in northwest Alabama near Borden Creek and Bee Branch (Winston County) by Walter Coxe in 1972 and 1973, respectively (Imhof, op. cit.). To our knowledge, the species has not previously been reported as far south as Tuscaloosa County.

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ANNOTATED CHECKLIST OF GEORGIA BIRDS

J. Fred Denton, W. Wilson Baker,
Leslie B. Davenport, Jr., Milton N. Hopkins, Jr.,
Chandler S. Robbins. 60 pp \$2.00

A REVIEW

As the title implies, this is a listing of the 351 species of birds which make up the official state list of Georgia. Each bird is listed by common and technical name, and its status by region and season is briefly summarized. There is also a map showing the major physiographic regions of Georgia and a brief introduction.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in the variety and distribution of birds in the South. It is especially enjoyable to compare the similarities and differences between Alabama and Georgia birds. There are some real surprises in store for anyone who takes the time to do so. As only one side of each page is printed, this little book just begs to be taken into the field and to be used to keep up with local records. Books may be ordered from:

Georgia Ornithological Society
755 Ellsworth Drive NW
Atlanta, GA 30318

1977 FALL SHOREBIRD SURVEY OF SWAN CREEK MANAGEMENT AREA
DECATUR, ALABAMA

Dennis Mark Brown

This survey is being done in cooperation with the International Shorebird Survey conducted by Manomet Bird Observatory in Manomet, Massachusetts.

Purpose

To prove that a small number of "stopover" areas will support a very large number of migratory shorebirds and to determine what habitat changes occur in these areas.

Sandpipers and plovers gather in almost unbelievable numbers at favored sites. While visiting these areas, the shorebirds feed and fatten in preparation for their upcoming transatlantic flight. The main concern is that the welfare of several North American shorebird species is increasingly threatened by habitat changes in these migratory stopover areas. There is concern that change of shorebird habitat does not allow the birds to prepare properly for their rigorous migration routes and that this lack of preparation is causing a higher migration fatality rate.

Methods

The survey area was usually visited every two to seven days and date and time of each visit was recorded. For census accuracy, all numbers recorded are counts, except those which are underlined. All underlined numbers are "guesstimates," i.e., an educated guess. For accuracy of species identification, only birds that were individually identified were recorded as a specific species. For example, in a flock of 100 Semipalmated Sandpipers, it is very possible that 1 or 2 Western Sandpipers could be overlooked. Therefore, if only 50 of the birds were identified as Semipalmateds, even if all appeared to be, they were recorded as 50 Semipalmated and 50 peep species. This applies mainly to peeps and dowitchers. All dowitchers were identified by call.

Results

A large number of shorebirds do use Swan Creek Management Area as a migratory stopover, and habitat changes detrimental to shorebirds do occur. The July 1 through Sept. 7 portion of the survey was done of the Dewatering Area of Swan Creek. The Sept. 25 through Nov. 30 portion was done along the shore of the Tennessee River in the Swan Creek Management Area. During the period of Sept. 8 through Sept. 24, while the Dewatering Area was being flooded and the Tennessee River was being lowered, there was no significant shorebird habitat available and no shorebirds were seen!

On October 28 the mudflats along the Tennessee River were flooded due to excessive rain, and no shorebirds were seen. During the Nov. 9 through Nov. 30 period, the gates of Swan Creek were locked to protect incoming waterfowl, thus the mudflats were inaccessible. However, the month of November produced a record rainfall by over six inches, and it is fairly safe to assume that the mudflats were flooded during most of this period. With the opening of duck hunting season, so came the opening of the gates on Dec. 5, and the winter portion of the survey was resumed.