

THE SAGA OF "OLE ONE-FOOT"

Robert A. Duncan

On 24 October 1977, I found an adult black-backed gull resting on a piling near the fishing pier at Ft. Morgan, AL. Shortly thereafter, it was observed by Tom and Joe Imhof, Lucy and Scot Duncan, Mary Lou Mattis and Roberta Bonwit. And so the saga of a long-lived and sometimes controversial gull began. The bird was identified, based on size, coloration and shape, as a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), a species with a history of vagrancy. The sighting was reported in *Alabama Birdlife* (1977, Vol. 25) as Alabama's first record of this species. On 30 October 1977, Lucy Duncan, Jerry Young and I located the bird again on the same piling and convinced an amused fisherman to take Lucy and Jerry out to the piling for a closer look so that a more accurate estimation of size could be made. Its right foot, which had been entangled in fishing line when originally found, was now severed. Thus, clearly marked for recognition, this unfortunate bird now paved the way for unequivocal observation (not identity!) along the northwest Florida and Alabama coasts. It is interesting to speculate, considering more than 20 sightings, the latest as recent as August 1990, what identifications of how many species would have been made in the 13 years since it was first discovered had it not lost its right foot!

On 17 September 1978, Charles D. Duncan (no relation), Ralph Havard, and Tuck Hayward found the gull at Dauphin Island, AL. and photographs were obtained. Charles Duncan's observation and study of photographs led to the conclusion that it was Alabama's first occurrence of a Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*) and was published in *American Birds* (1982, Vol. 36.)

Since the 1978 sighting, there have been no less than 25 reports in the Pensacola, FL area, primarily at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola and the downtown waterfront area. While it is not the purpose of this article to resurrect the question of this bird's identity, for most observers have long abandoned the attempt, I would like to summarize the sightings and some of the opinions expressed. Everyone now agrees it is not a Lesser Black-backed Gull. Some deduce that it is a Western Gull. I consider this a possibility except that this species has little if any history of vagrancy east of the west coast. The consensus is that it's a hybrid and I am strongly inclined to agree with that hypothesis. In recent years it has been found associating with an adult Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) in spring. Observers are generally in agreement on

field marks originally described by Charles Duncan and me. I have observed the bird from as close as nine meters (30 feet) in excellent light in recent years and can only add that the periorbital ring is definitely pink, the eye best described as dull yellow, and size about 2.54 to 5.08 cm (one to two inches) smaller than adjacent Herring Gulls. A summary of sightings available to me since 1978 follows:

| DATE | LOCATION | OBSERVER(S) |
|----------------------|--------------------|--|
| 24 Nov 1980 | Ft. Pickens | Lynn & Brooks Atherton (AB 35:193)* |
| 22 April 1981 | Ft. Pickens | Phil & Fred Tetlow (AB 35:833) |
| 27 Nov 1981 | Ft. Pickens | Robert A. Duncan |
| 6 April 1982 | Ft. Pickens | Wayne H. Valentine |
| 7 April 1982 | Ft. Pickens | Robert, Lucy & Scot Duncan |
| 10 April 1982 | Ft. Pickens | Owen Fang, Curtis Kingsbery, Ann & Tony Ziccardi (AB 36:862) |
| 3 Dec 1982 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan (AB 37:310) |
| 29 March 1983 | Naval Air Station | Phil Tetlow |
| 21 June 1983 | Waterfront | Dick Ballman |
| 8 July 1983 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan |
| 20-29 April 1984 | Waterfront and NAS | Paul Johnson, Robert A. Duncan et al. |
| 8 Dec 1984 | Naval Air Station | Paul Johnson |
| 22 August 1984 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan |
| 11 June 1985 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan |
| 15 April-19 May 1985 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan |
| 7 May 1986 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan (AB 39:312 & 40:484) |
| 5 Feb 1987 | Naval Air Station | Robert A. Duncan |
| 14 Sept. 1987 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan (AB 42:89) |
| 21 Dec. 1987 | Naval Air Station | Paul Johnson |
| 23-25 June 1988 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan, Henry M. Stevenson |
| 16 May 1989 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan (AB 43:489) |
| 30 August 1990 | Waterfront | Robert A. Duncan |

*American Birds

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As the bird was at least four years old when discovered, it is now at least 17 years old and has been able to survive with one foot missing for 13 years! Its true identity may never be known, unless it is obliging enough to die of old age, disease or predation while being observed, in which case the specimen can be sent to experts for positive identification. Considering the history of this gull, there is no assurance that an "in hand" study would settle the matter!

Robert A. Duncan, 614 Fairpoint Drive, Gulf Breeze, FL 32561.

1990 SPRING SIGHTINGS

Greg D. Jackson

The spring of 1990 was productive for birders in the AOS area, with quite a few interesting species and generally good numbers of regular migrants. A first state record for Alabama, and a first western Panhandle record of the same species, were exciting, though the cheering subsides on learning of the type of bird that was recorded. More about that later.

Temperatures were normal for the season. Overall we had less rain than usual in most areas. Birmingham had a rainfall deficit of over five inches during the period, with a three inch deficiency in April. There were several fronts, though, that produced "fallouts" on the coast. Best birding days across the region were 17 and 30 Mar, 7 and 27-28 Apr, and 5-6 and 9 May. The most significant weather phenomenon this spring was the presence of strong east and southeast winds in the Gulf in late April and early May. This produced a relative abundance of a few species that usually migrate further to the east.

The following report covers the period March through May 1990 in Alabama and the Florida Panhandle (east to the Apalachicola River). The appearance of an observation in this column does not indicate verification or acceptance of a record for a very rare species, as this must be considered by the appropriate state records committee. Concerning the acceptance of sightings, it is essential that all submissions of birds that are unusual, either in general or for a particular season or region, be accompanied by adequate details of the observation. A list of species for which details are needed prior to publication appeared in the last issue of *The Yellowhammer*; a copy of this list can be obtained by writing me at the address below. Your help in this matter is appreciated.