

GENERAL NOTES

NOTES FROM THE COASTAL PLAIN
AND FLORIDA GULF COAST

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Reports of the following species during the summer and early fall of 1968 from the Coastal Plain of Alabama and the Panama City-Laguna Beach area of Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast may be of interest to Alabama observers. The reports from Northwest Florida are pertinent because of its nearness and ecological similarity to the Alabama Gulf Coast.

Purple Gallinules

In Alabama's Upper Coastal Plain, at a farm owned by Mr. and Mrs. James Bird near Forkland in southern Greene County, Russell Bailey, my wife Elberta and I were pleasantly surprised on August 17, 1968, by an adult and three immature Purple Gallinules. The birds were in a pond filled with water-lillies and American lotus (still commonly known by its Indian name "yonquapin", and a plant that might be described as a giant pond lily although it is of a different family). Both the brilliantly colored adult and drab brown young were feeding while walking over the lily pads, and a number of Cattle Egrets in the surrounding field added to the "tropical" atmosphere. Records in Imhof's Alabama Birds (1962:213-14) include observations of Purple Gallinules in recent years during June in nearby counties (in 1955 at the Marion Fish Hatchery by Imhof, and in 1956 at Demopolis Lake by Walter W. Beshears—older June records are from Autauga County and Auburn). There were reports of adult gallinules seen in the same area of Greene County earlier in the summer, so the presence of the young in this case may well furnish the northernmost breeding evidence in Alabama of this colorful, basically subtropical species.

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers

In the late afternoon on September 30, Elberta and I spotted a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Coffee County in the Lower Coastal Plain. As we watched, it dropped down from its perch on a telephone wire, caught an insect in the field below, returned to eat it on the wire, and then chased off a Mockingbird that alighted closer than suited its preference. We saw only a single bird, which had the long tail of the adult but not much of the bright pink around the shoulders, showing that coloration only on the underparts. This is the first reported observation of the Scissor-tail in the Lower Coastal Plain, there being few inland records for the state at all. It is also an early fall migration date except for an observation by J.W. Johnson and John C. Hall in Cherokee County on August 22, 1964. Thus far, the only other inland fall report is one by Bob Skinner on the Tombigbee River 18 miles WSW of Demopolis on October 18, 1964. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers appear to have been extending their range east in Arkansas where an average of two birds per route were reported on the 1967 breeding bird surveys conducted under the Migratory Bird Populations Station, and they have been wintering more and more in Southwest and extreme South Florida as shown by recent Christmas bird counts reported in Audubon Field Notes. These fall mi-

gration sightings in Alabama may well be of the more eastern birds going to Florida for the winter rather than crossing the Gulf to Central America.

Earlier in the year, Dr. Marion L. Hanahan of Dothan, Elberta and I observed another Scissor-tail on July 7 at Panama City Beach, about two miles west of Saint Andrew State Park where, incidentally, a Gray Kingbird had been noted. Imhof's Alabama Birds (1962:345-47) and subsequent reports show only three records of Scissor-tails in Alabama during the months of June and July—one by David Brown in Cullman County on June 2, 1957, one by Fr. J. L. Dorn on Dauphin Island on June 12, 1965, and the other by C. W. Summerour, also on Dauphin Island, on July 4, 1958. All of these observations are of particular interest because occurring during or near the nesting season.

Parasitic Jaeger

On September 28, 1968, Elberta reported a Parasitic Jaeger on Panama City Beach. This species has been observed in Alabama only off the Gulf Coast and would be considered rare. In addition, it appeared earlier in the season than might be expected for this wandering visitor from the northern seas. The bird seemed relatively tame and perhaps was either tired or sick. The next day a bird we assumed to be the same one was found dead with a broken right wing on a road in the same area after presumably being hit by a car. On account of the heat, the specimen was not in a condition to be preserved. However, we collected the wings and tail feathers, which were brought back to Birmingham to be identified by other interested birders. The specimen measured 18" in length, and the central tail feathers, which were pointed as is the case with the Parasitic species, extended an average of 1 3/4" beyond the other tail feathers. The bird had the black cap of the adult, clear white underparts extending all the way down from the throat, and white markings at the end of the wings that are caused by the white quills and white portions of the primary feathers. It also had white at the base of the tail that is not shown in most of the field guides but is shown in the picture by Arthur Singer in Dr. Oliver Austin's Birds of the World (1961:128).

Redhead

Throughout the summer and early fall, several Birmingham observers noted a male Redhead in a lake east of Phillips Inlet near the Laguna Beach area. Observations were by Pat and Gayle Riley on May 26-28, by Harriett and Dr. D. O. Wright on June 23-25, and by me on July 7 and September 29. As noted by Kortright (1942:230-31, 422-23), the male Redhead, unlike most other male ducks, has only a partial eclipse plumage in the summer. This bird had lost its dark chest feathers when seen on July 7, but had regained most of them by the end of September although it then still retained much brownish coloration on its sides.

Common Merganser

As regards summering waterfowl, Dr. Hanahan, Elberta and I saw a male Common Merganser on July 7 on Hurricane Island (also known as Shell Island) in the mouth of Saint Andrew Bay. Although we are accustomed to seeing some Red-breasted Mergansers in summer in the bay, this bird had no brown or russet feathers on the chest, and it had the more extensive white feathers on the wings and scapulars that appear in the Common or American species. It was not then in eclipse plumage since it still had its green head feathers.

Brown Pelicans

We also saw a flight of 20 Brown Pelicans on July 7 in the Gulf off Panama City Beach. This compares with approximately 30 reported by Dr. Dan C. Holliman and others on Dauphin Island the spring and summer of 1968 and is encouraging evidence of at least a limited return of this species to our coastal water.

Literature Cited:

Audubon Field Notes, Florida Christmas Counts, 1966 and 1967, 21(2):191-211, 22 (2):210-29. In 1966 Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were reported on five Florida counts—Fort Myers (4), Naples (2), Coot Bay-Everglades National Park (2), Key Largo-Plantation Key (12) and Key West (7)—and in 1967 on four—Bradenton (3), Fort Myers (5), Coot Bay-Everglades National Park (1) and Key Largo-Plantation Key (10) (no 1967 count reported from Key West).

Austin, Oliver L., 1961, Birds of the World, Golden Press, N. Y., N.Y., 316 pp.

Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Migratory Bird Populations Station, Laurel, Md., 1968, "Preliminary Report on the 1967 Breeding Bird Survey" (Administrative Report No. 149).

Imhof, Thomas A., 1962, Alabama Birds, University of Alabama Press, 591 pp.

Johnson, Julian W., 1964, "Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Cherokee County", Alabama Birdlife, 12(3-4):44.

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OBSERVATIONS ON A BROWN THRASHER
DEHUSKING ACORNS ON THE GROUND

Dr. Gordon Gunter

Pough (1946, The Eastern Land Birds, Doubleday, Inc., Garden City, N.Y.) says that the Brown Thrasher eats acorns. Imhof (1962, Alabama Birds, University of Alabama Press) makes the same statement. These and other local references make no mention of the fact that this slender built bird dehusks the acorns before eating them. This process would seem to be virtually impossible even when one sees it being done. For that reason the following observations may be of some interest.

The Brown Thrasher is quite common in this area and feeds often among the leaves in my yard.

I was amazed one fall day to notice that this long-billed bird had placed small leathery acorns in little pits in the ground and was trying to peck them open. This ground was soft, silty sand among large oak trees and small pines and my observations were made from my bathroom window. Over and over again the Thrasher pecked at the small leathery acorns and never before was I so impressed with the intensity with which wild animals seek food. Over and over the bird pounded so heavily that one would think it jarred his brains. Possibly such was the case, because every once in a while the Thrasher stopped as if to rest and take a few breaths. Every once in a while also the acorn flew out of the little pit. It was retrieved and replaced. I should have counted the times the bird struck the acorn but the surprising performance bemused me. In any case I had the impression that ten or a dozen strikes were made before the acorn fell open and the internal part, tannic acid and all, was made available to the Thrasher, who swallowed it immediately. Then the bird left the scene. There were several pits in the ground and obviously this bird or others gathered acorns and ate them at this place. However, I rather suspect that they do not eat many in one day because the effort seems to be very great.

The acorn in question is from the water oak, Quercus nigra, and it was identified for me by Mr. Lionel Eleuterius. In the early fall in this part of the world the external texture of this acorn is rather leathery.

Some authors have reported that the Brown Thrasher places acorns in cracks of wood and bark of trees. This may well be the ordinary case, but acorns placed in pits in the ground would seem to be safer to handle and less damaging if they are struck with a glancing blow.

After the above was written Dr. Oliver L. Austin has pointed out to me that M. P. Skinner (Guide to the winter birds of the North Carolina sandhills, 1928) "described exactly the same thing. . ." Apparently these observations have not been reported by other writers and mine stand as a corroboration of Skinner's.

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