

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL:

FIRST RECORD FOR ALABAMA

Robert A. Duncan

On October 24, 1977, I observed an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus) resting on a piling about 100 feet offshore at Fort Morgan, Alabama. In good light with 7x35 binoculars, I observed that it had a white tail and underparts, yellow bill with indistinct dark markings in a ring toward the end with a red spot at the angle of the mandible, faint brown blurred streakings on the white head and slate-gray wings. Royal Terns (Sterna maxima) and Laughing Gulls (Larus atricilla) were on adjacent posts and allowed easy size comparisons. The Lesser Black-backed Gull appeared to be the same length as the terns and considerably larger than the Laughing Gulls. Shortly thereafter, I was joined by Tom and Joe Imhof, Lucy Duncan, Mary Lou Mattis and Roberta Bonwit who leisurely studied the gull through binoculars and telescopes. Mary Lou Mattis photographed the bird. After it stood up, we observed that its leg coloration was pallid.

The brown streakings on the head indicate an adult in winter plumage (Bent, 1963). Although most individuals have yellow legs, some adults have pallid legs in winter (Peterson, 1974), including some vagrants observed along the Florida east coast (Dan Heathcote, pers. comm.). On October 30, 1977, Lucy Duncan, Bill Young and I again observed the bird on a piling even closer to shore. Its right leg, which had been entangled in fishing line, was completely severed near the knee. We commandeered the boat of an amused fisherman allowing us to measure the post on which the gull had been resting. The post measured 13 inches in diameter, and we estimated the bird in a standing posture was 4 to 6 inches longer than the post. This compares favorably with measurements of Lesser Black-backed Gulls according to Robbins (1966). It was observed by many and was seen as late as November 1, 1977.

There are at least 15 records of Lesser Black-backed Gulls for the Gulf Coast, nine from the Texas coast (Oberholser, 1974) and six for the Florida Gulf Coast north of Key West (American Birds, Vols. 29-31), including two specimens (Woolfenden and Schreiber, 1974; Stevenson, 1975). Both specimens were of the graellsii or Western European race. Woolfenden (1973) now considers Lesser Black-backed Gulls rare but regular winter residents in Florida. Thus, this sighting and photograph may be the precursor of future Alabama records of this rare European wanderer.

Acknowledgments

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MIGRATORY HOMING ABILITY AMONG

PURPLE MARTINS

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The Purple Martin (Progne subis subis) has been recognized for several centuries as one of North America's most beneficial birds. As early as the late 1700's, Audubon observed martins nesting in gourds erected by Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians in the states of Alabama and Mississippi. Many theories and tales have been created about this beautiful bird that so eagerly nests in man-made sites. One such theory is that the same birds return year after year to the same nesting cavities, and it is this theory that I have chosen to examine more closely.

Question

Do Purple Martins return to the same breeding colonies year after year in sufficiently large numbers to justify the previously mentioned homing theory?

Terms

Local - young bird of present hatching year incapable of sustained flight.

Adult - any breeding bird, whether first or second year plumage.

Methods

Research began in March, 1976, and is still being conducted. Both adults and local birds were banded with aluminum bands provided through the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bird Banding Laboratory, Laurel, Maryland. Forty-two birds were banded in the year 1976 at three locations in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. The localities are as follows: (1) Lake Lurleen State Park, approximately eight miles (12.80 kilometers) WNW of Northport, Alabama; (2) and (3) are pair colonies located in the Riverdale subdivision (Tuscaloosa), 1.5 miles (2.4 kilometers) north of the Black Warrior River and .4 miles (.64 kilometers) east of U. S. Highway 82.

The adult birds were obtained while roosting through the use of an extremely large cone-shaped net, constructed of nylon sheer and fastened to the end of a ten-foot pole. The birds were selected strictly at random; however, at the end of the first banding period (March to June, 1976), the birds' sex ratio broke at exactly 50% males and 50% females. Two local birds were also obtained, but these were not included in the overall sex ratio tabulations.