

HURRICANE-DRIVEN BIRDS IN SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA

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Abstract—We document birds borne into extreme southeastern Oklahoma by hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which passed through the area during early and mid-September 2008, furnishing a state record: Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscata*), and other species rare to this area.

Hurricane Gustav passed through the Gulf of Mexico and made landfall as a Category 1 hurricane on the southwestern coast of Louisiana on 1 September 2008. It continued northwestward and, at about 600 h CDT on 3 September, the storm's eye crossed the Red River into McCurtain County. At this time it was reduced to a tropical storm with winds of 32 km/h. A cold front was situated to the northwest of the area and was moving southeasterly. The clash of the 2 fronts caused Gustav to turn northeasterly, and it continued through Arkansas.

On the morning of 3 September, we had selected 2 locations from which to monitor hurricane-driven birds in southeastern Oklahoma. Heck monitored the 3,642-ha Broken Bow Lake, located 16 km north of Broken Bow, and Arbour monitored the 2,400-ha U. S. Forest Service Red Slough Wildlife Management Area (Red Slough), located 3 km north of the Red River, and 55 km south of Broken Bow Lake. Weather in the area was 23°C, with a strong NNE wind, and light rain during most of the morning.

At 845 h, Heck observed a Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscata*) flying over the lake, and 3 more were observed during the next hour. The Sooty Tern, an Oklahoma state record, was accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee (OBRC) on 1 August 2009. A Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) (record accepted 1 August 2009, OBRC) was observed at 940 h, and 2 juvenile Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) flew by (all birds were photographed except 3 of the 4 Sooty Terns which were too distant). Nearly every bird observed at the lake was flying easterly, apparently following the storm.

By 1100 h, hurricane-driven birds were no longer seen at the lake, so Heck joined Arbour at Red Slough where, during the morning, he had observed several species rare to the area, including 4 Sooty Terns, a Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*), and a Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maxima*). Arbour also reported a Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*) that was declined by OBRC due to lack of a photo or specimen required for new state record. Arbour also reported a Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) harassing a Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*). The Jaeger was accepted by OBRC as *Stercorarius* sp. based on distance and weather conditions. During the late morning and early afternoon, we observed 4 more juvenile Laughing Gulls, 3 Sabine's Gulls (*Xema sabini*) in alternate plumage, 2 Red-necked Phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*), 6 more Sooty Terns, and another

Magnificent Frigatebird, that was accepted by OBRC as *Fregata* sp. due to its distance from observers, weather conditions, and lack of a photo.

Other observers visited the Red Slough WMA during the afternoon, but the rare birds had, by then, departed. On his way home that afternoon, Steve Metz (pers. comm.) observed a Sooty Tern at Broken Bow Lake, which brought the total for the day to 15 Sooty Tern observations.

Hurricane Ike closely followed the track of Hurricane Gustav through the Gulf of Mexico but reached land farther west, near Galveston, Texas, on 12 September 2008. Its path from Galveston was northwards, and as the hurricane approached southeastern Oklahoma late in the afternoon on 13 September, 10 observers waited at Red Slough in rain and wind of 37 km/h with gusts of 46 km/h from the NE. Before the hurricane reached the Red Slough area, about 3 h after dark, it turned easterly into Arkansas, with the eye passing several km east of McCurtain County. The weather cleared during the morning of 14 September, with temperature of 25°C, wind 21 km/h from WNW, and scattered clouds. But no hurricane-driven birds were observed at Red Slough.

Heck and J. Sterling left Red Slough to check Broken Bow Lake (about 55 km north), arriving about 815 h, where they observed a Sooty Tern at 915 h, and later, a Royal Tern and two more Sooty Terns, all flying north. By noon, a cold front passed through and ended rare bird sightings.

Total observations for hurricane-driven birds in southeastern Oklahoma for these 2 events were 18 Sooty Terns, 2 Royal Terns, 2 Red-necked Phalaropes, 1 Common Tern, 6 Laughing Gulls, 3 Sabine's Gulls, 1 Magnificent Frigatebird, 1 Jaeger, and 1 Frigatebird. All of these are pelagic, coastal, or rare water birds driven north about 500 km by the 2 hurricanes, or forced from their migration routes by the same.

When Hurricane Ike passed through the center of Arkansas moving NE, it resulted in many sightings of rare birds (R. Baxter, pers. comm.). Sooty Terns were seen at several lakes in Arkansas, and a Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*), Jaeger, and Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) were seen at Millwood Lake in Hempstead Co. A Magnificent Frigatebird was also seen in southeastern Arkansas. It is noteworthy that Colorado recorded its first Sooty Tern on 12 September 2008 in Otero County (B. Percival, pers. comm.). Otero County is about 925 km NW of Red Slough.

There is a record for a Frigatebird of uncertain species on 31 August 1980 at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, Alfalfa county (Goard, H. W. and D. M. Goard. A Frigatebird at the Great Salt Plains. Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society 15:3). This bird probably wandered into Oklahoma as a result of Hurricane Allen in 1980. It was an extremely powerful hurricane, rated at category 3 when it landed at Brownsville, Texas, on 10 August 1980, and then traveled WNW across Texas into Mexico (NOAA Technical Report NWS 35).

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First record for Snow Bunting in southeastern Oklahoma.—A male Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) was observed on a levee at the U.S. Forest Service, Red Slough Wildlife Management Area (Red Slough) in southeastern Oklahoma, 4–12 November 2007 (Fig. 1). Red Slough is a managed wetland area situated in the floodplain of the Red River, encompassing 2,430 ha, about 9.5 km south of Haworth, McCurtain County, Oklahoma. Matt White and David Arbour first observed this bird while guiding a group of bird-watchers at Red Slough. It was sitting on a levee road that was topped with crushed limestone gravel and was perched on this same habitat type each time observed. The Snow Bunting moved to different areas during the next week while being observed by many visitors and was last observed on 12 November 2007. It is notable that 2 Snow Buntings were observed by Charles Mills (pers. comm. 2009) at Millwood Lake, Little River County, Arkansas, 18–24 November 2007. This area is about 70 km E of Red Slough.

The earliest report of a Snow Bunting in Oklahoma was 22 December 1960 in Cimarron County where 3 were reported flying overhead, near Kenton, by L. Oring (Sutton, G. M. Oklahoma Birds. Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 641). The next report was 15 December 1972 in Craig County at a bird feeder south of Ketchum, where 1–3 Snow Buntings were regularly seen through March 1973, and a Snow Bunting was seen 21 December 1972 in Cleveland County, NW of Norman, by T. Parker and D. Hayward, and was collected 22 December by G. M. Sutton (UOMZ 7396) (Bulletin. Oklahoma Ornithological Society 6:33).



Fig 1. Snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) photographed at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area (Red Slough) in southeastern Oklahoma on 9 November 2007 by author.

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Fulvous Whistling-Ducks in southeastern Oklahoma.—On 13 May 2009, we were surveying birds at the U.S. Forest Service Red Slough Wildlife Management Area in southeastern McCurtain County. It was a sunny day, but there had been rain earlier in the week and water was in most of the grassy fields. At 1045 h, we were driving on a gravel road with water on both sides when 4 Fulvous Whistling-Ducks (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) flushed near the road and lit in a nearby impoundment. When we returned from surveying birds in that area at 1145 h, we flushed the whistling-ducks again and they lit in a flooded field nearby. On 14 May, several birders failed to locate the whistling-ducks, and they were not seen subsequently.

There are 4 previous records for Fulvous Whistling-Duck In Oklahoma: 1 in Cleveland County, 3 March 1956 (Sutton, G. M. 1967. Oklahoma Birds. Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 59), 1 in Comanche County, 1–16 July 1983 (Tyler, J. D. 1983. Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol.Soc. 16:25), 5 in Tulsa County, 30 June 1984 (J. Lloyd, pers. comm.), and 4 in Johnston County, 30 April 2007 (J. Arterburn, pers. comm.).

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