

GoMMAPPS seabird trip report
28 April – 30 May 2017
SEAMAP spring ichthyoplankton survey
NOAA ship R/V Oregon II, R2-17-02 (322)

Summary: The Gulf of Mexico (GoM) region is critical in affording key breeding, staging, and wintering habitats for North America’s avifauna. Yet limited information is available to characterize species composition, distribution, and abundance of birds Gulfwide, particularly given the large number of platforms and cumulative level of oil and gas activity in the northern GoM region. The Gulf of Mexico Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (GoMMAPPS) Seabird Project anticipates being the most spatially and temporally extensive avian research effort ever conducted in the northern GoM. The GoMMAPPS Seabird Project will document the distribution, abundance, and diversity of birds so as to better inform regulatory decisions that influence the conservation of migratory avian resources.

From 28 April to 30 May 2017, three GoMMAPPS seabird observers accompanied the SEAMAP spring ichthyoplankton survey conducted aboard the R/V *Oregon II* based at the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, Pascagoula, MS. Nicholas Metheny, Michelle McDowell, and J. Chris Haney stood watches to count all birds detected within a 300 m strip transect while the ship was underway between the standardized SEAMAP sampling stations (*Figure 1*). Observers counted for a total of approximately 180 hours across 25 calendar days during which the ship was in transit. Approximately 4 calendar days otherwise available and scheduled to be surveyed were lost due to weather and mechanical issues. Survey time per day ranged from as little as 2 hours to just less than 14 hours.

This initial launch of the GoMMAPPS seabird survey project was extraordinarily successful. In addition to widespread coverage across the Gulf of Mexico, especially the remote, deeper waters away from the continental shelf, observers detected no fewer than 25 species of pelagic, offshore, and coastal marine seabird species, as well as at least 7 species of cetaceans, two sea turtles, and various other biota. Seabird observers also detected several species for which their status has been heretofore poorly known.

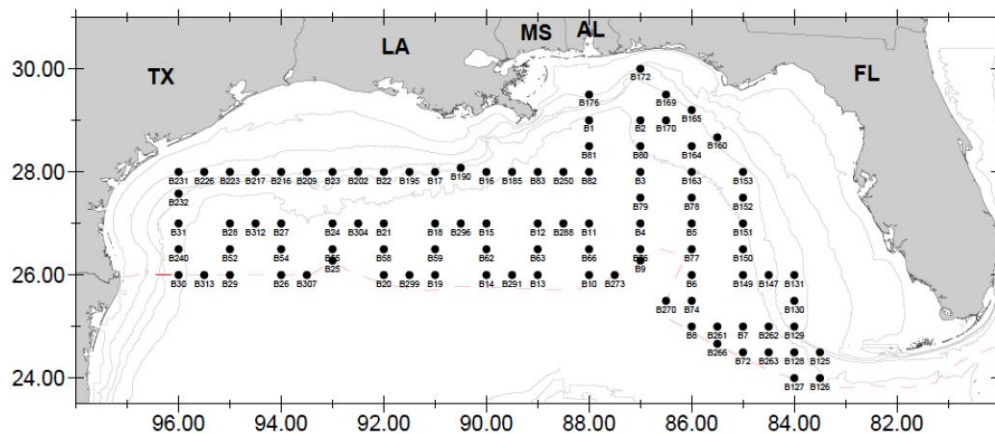


Figure 1. Anticipated cruise track in the Gulf of Mexico showing SEAMAP ichthyoplankton sampling stations for NOAA ship *Oregon II* cruise, April 28 – May 30, 2017. Although not all individual stations were sampled for SEAMAP purposes, GoMMAPPS seabird observers conducted some surveys within most of the entire region delimited by the outer limits of this sampling grid, as well as some additional areas while transiting to and from the port of Pascagoula, MS.