

GoMMAPPS Seabird Trip Report
16 - 25 May 2018
Spring Plankton, Leg #2
R/V Oregon II

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 the species composition, distribution, and abundance of birds Gulf wide, particularly given the large number of platforms (in the Central and Western Planning Areas), and cumulative level of oil and gas activity in the northern GoM region (2012, 2013). 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 (Seabird Science Plan 2016).

From 16 – 25 May 2018, one GoMMAPPS seabird observer accompanied the NOAA spring plankton cruise, Leg 2, aboard the *R/V Oregon II* based at the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, Pascagoula, MS. Mark Oberle conducted counts of all birds detected within a 300-m strip transect while the ship was underway (Balance and Force 2016)(Figure 1). The observer counted all seabirds detected during a total of ~48 hrs over 10 calendar days. Although no time was lost to weather during this cruise leg, the ship returned to port a few days early due to the emergence in the eastern Gulf of Subtropical Storm Alberto, the first named storm of the 2018 Atlantic hurricane season. Across both legs of the 2018 NOAA spring plankton survey, the entire grid of standard sampling stations was completed. Daily survey time on this leg ranged from ~1.5 – 6.5 hrs, with ~2.5 hrs of observation effort on the first afternoon while on transit from port (16 May).

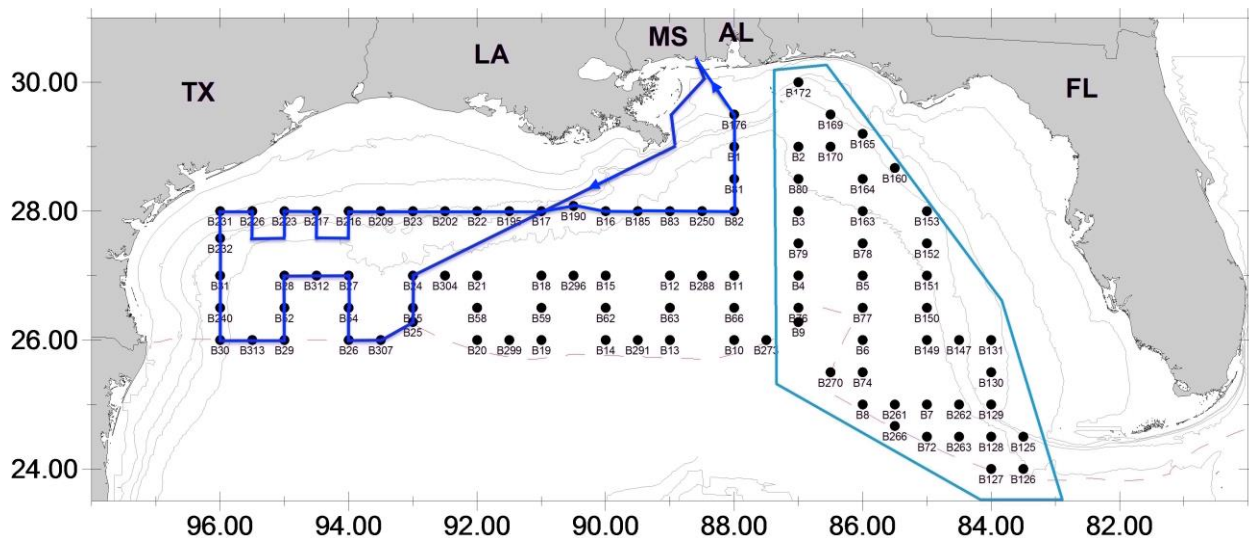


Figure 1. Map of the spring plankton stations and ship track lines for the NOAA 2018 spring plankton survey aboard the *R/V Oregon II*. A GoMMAPPS observer conducted strip transect surveys during parts or all of the scheduled cruise dates, as well as transiting between track lines beginning on 16 May and ending on the early morning of 25 May. **NOTE:** depiction of the survey route is a general approximation only, and thus may not exactly represent the ship’s course at a finer scale. The track line with arrows, indicated in dark blue, is route completed during Leg 2 of the spring plankton survey. Leg 2 began far off southwestern Louisiana, worked generally clockwise to the west, then north, and finally back east.

This GoMMAPPS seabird survey was successful and provided key information for decision-makers. In general, spatial coverage from the *R/V Oregon II* during this leg of the spring plankton survey was concentrated in very deep, pelagic waters of the Western Planning Area between the EEZ and the edge of the continental shelf edge (Figure 1). The observer detected 10 different species of pelagic, offshore, and

coastal marine birds, as well as a 5 species of migrating passerines and wading birds. The total count and birds per day were at the very lowest range for GoMMAPPS surveys conducted to date. In total, sightings of at least 79 individual birds were entered in the SEEBIRD database, a detection rate of ~8 birds/d or around 1.4 birds/hr on Leg 2 of the 2018 spring plankton survey. Several marine mammals were also detected on Leg 2, including: Atlantic bottlenose, Atlantic spotted, and pantropical spotted dolphins, as well as a species of blackfish that was most likely short-finned pilot whale. No sea turtles were recorded.

BIRD SPECIES LIST

- pomarine jaeger¹
- laughing gull¹
- common tern¹
- bridled tern¹
- royal tern¹
- band-rumped storm-petrel¹
- Leach's storm-petrel¹
- masked booby¹
- brown booby¹
- brown pelican¹

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- barn swallow
- cliff swallow
- blackpoll warbler
- palm warbler
- cattle egret

¹ Both coastal and pelagic seabird representatives are included above the line and all other species (identified to species) are indicated below the line