

GoMMAPPS Seabird Vessel Trip Report
Winter MMC- Leg 3
12 - 26 February 2018
R/V GORDON GUNTER, R-336

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 12 – 27 February 2018, two GoMMAPPS seabird observers accompanied the GoMMAPPS winter marine mammal cruise Leg 3 aboard the R/V *Gordon Gunter* based out of the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service lab, Pascagoula, MS. Jeff Gleason and Yvan Satge conducted counts of all birds detected within a 300-m strip transect while the ship was underway (Ballance and Force 2016) (**Figure 1**). Observers counted seabirds for a total of ~155 hrs over 15 calendar days. Essentially no time that was scheduled to be surveyed was lost to weather on this leg. Daily survey time ranged from ~11.0-11.5 hrs, with ~4.0 hrs of observation effort on the first afternoon while on transit from port (12 February).

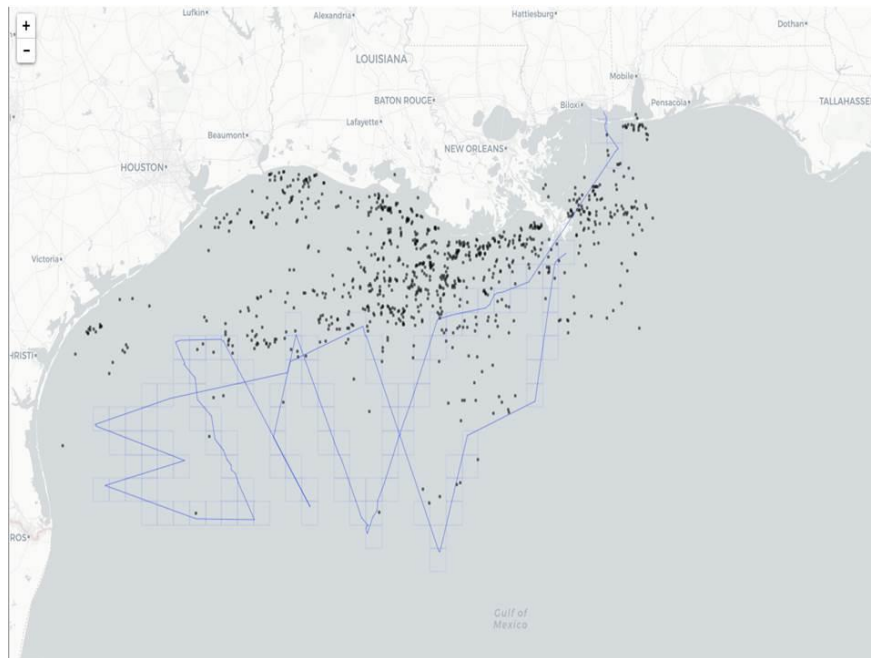


Figure 1. Map of the marine mammal track lines for the 2018 NOAA winter marine mammal cruise aboard the R/V *Gordon Gunter*. GoMMAPPS observers conducted strip transect surveys during parts or all of the scheduled cruise dates, as well as transiting between track lines beginning on 12 February and ending on the evening of 26 February. NOTE: Leg 3 started on transit to W-SW of Pascagoula, MS, and then worked generally to the west. Black dots on the map indicate locations of oil and gas platforms.

This GoMMAPPS seabird survey was successful and will provide valuable information for decision-makers, particularly given the dearth of seabird data available during the mid-winter period. In general, spatial coverage from the R/V *Gordon Gunter* during this leg of the marine mammal cruise was widespread and generally off the Shelf, in the Western and Central Planning Areas out to the EEZ (**Figure 1**). Observers detected 15 different species of pelagic and coastal marine birds (see list below). The total count and birds per day were both relatively high compared to all the vessel surveys to date. In total for this leg of the 2018 winter marine mammal cruise, sightings of ~2,059 individual birds were entered in the SEEBIRD database; ~137 birds/d or >13 birds/hr. Herring gulls and pomarine jaegers tended to be the most frequently detected species and both were generally widespread and abundant across the survey area.

SPECIES LIST

- herring gull¹
- laughing gull¹
- ring-billed gull¹
- pomarine jaeger¹
- parasitic jaeger¹
- bridled tern¹
- royal tern¹
- Caspian tern¹
- brown pelican¹
- double-crested cormorant¹
- northern gannet¹
- common loon¹
- magnificent frigatebird¹
- Manx shearwater¹
- brown booby¹

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- blue-winged teal
- greater scaup
- great blue heron
- great egret
- barn swallow
- cliff swallow
- rock pigeon

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