

GoMMAPPS Seabird Vessel Trip Report
11 - 30 September 2018
SEAMAP Fall Plankton
R/V GORDON GUNTER

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 11 September – 30 September 2018, two GoMMAPPS seabird observers accompanied the NOAA fall plankton survey aboard the R/V *Gordon Gunter* based out of the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, Pascagoula, MS. Matt Love and Stormy Paxton conducted counts of all birds detected within a 300-m strip transect while the ship was underway (Balance and Force 2016) (*Figure 1*). Observers stood watch for seabirds a total of ~211 hrs over 19 calendar days; fewer hours were spent in active survey mode due to regular stoppages for station sampling. Some survey time was lost to inclement weather during parts of 3 days on this leg. Survey time was generally 10–12 hrs daily, with ~3.5 hrs of additional observation effort while on transit from port (11 September).

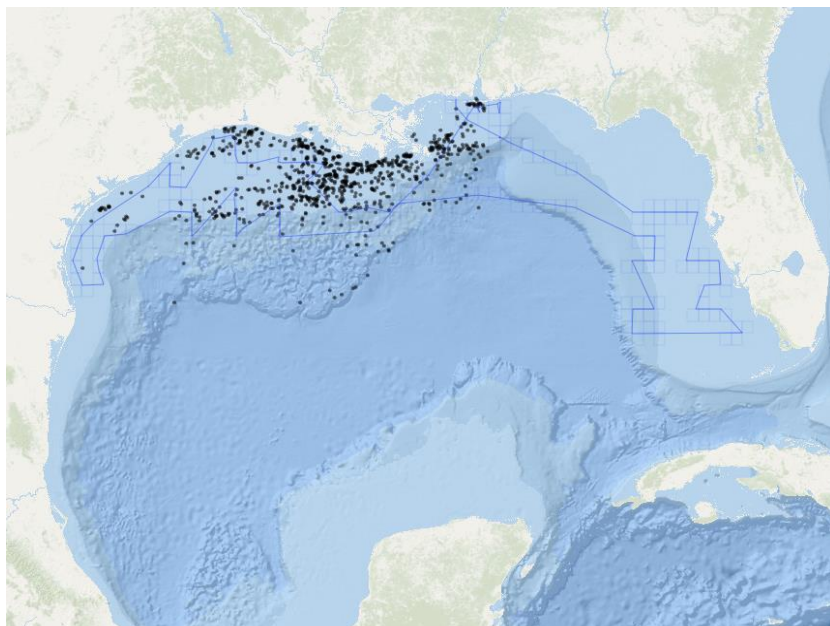


Figure 1. The NOAA-SEAMAP 2018 fall plankton survey aboard the R/V *Gordon Gunter* was conducted at stations primarily on and off the continental shelf, but not out to the EEZ. Observers conducted strip transect surveys during parts or all of the scheduled cruise dates, as well as on transit between sample stations. This survey started at Pascagoula, MS on September 11, 2018 and proceeded to the W Florida shelf, crossing DeSoto Canyon. Most seabird survey effort was in continental shelf waters, including along the W coast of Florida to just N of the FL Keys. The route then proceeded along the outer shelf back N to the Mississippi Delta LA, along the inner shelf S to Brownsville, TX, then N and E along the outer shelf back to the coast of Alabama. NOTE: blue track lines depict where this survey was conducted. Black dots on the map indicate locations of oil and gas platforms.

This GoMMAPPS seabird survey will provide key information for decision-makers. In general, spatial coverage by the R/V *Gordon Gunter* during this survey was widespread in continental shelf waters of all lease planning areas in the GoM (*Figure 1*). Several rare or casual species for the GoM were noted,

including a red-billed tropicbird and two sightings of red-footed booby off SW FL. A black-capped petrel was also observed and photographed at the shelf edge off Marco Island, FL. As of 5 October 2018, this seabird had been [proposed](#) for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Areas of the GoM surveyed included a stretch of the Florida coast plagued by an extensive red tide from about Clearwater south to Marco Island; this area was nearly devoid of birds. Conversely, in the western Gulf, an avian hotspot extended along a coastal stretch near Padre Island National Seashore; here black terns were particularly concentrated. Observers noted more than 1,700 individual black terns with several flocks numbering into the hundreds. As on GoMMAPPS surveys that were running concurrently aboard the R/V *Pisces*, the survey aboard the R/V *Gordon Gunter* detected a variety of migrating passerines, shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, and wading birds. Observers detected 49 total species (25 species of pelagic, offshore, and coastal marine birds; see ¹ below); about average diversity for this season. Total count and number of birds per day were at the upper range relative to all other GoMMAPPS surveys conducted to date. In total for this leg, sightings of ~4,739 total birds (~3,600 seabirds; see List below) were entered into the SEEBIRD database, a detection rate of >249 birds/d or >22 birds/hr. A number of sea turtles were also recorded; all of which were identified as loggerheads with most appearing to be small juveniles (or hatchlings). Marine mammal sightings included: Atlantic bottlenose, Atlantic spotted, and pantropical spotted dolphins, plus sperm and Bryde's whales.

BIRD SPECIES LIST

- Audubon's shearwater¹
- band-rumped storm-petrel¹
- black-capped petrel¹
- black tern¹
- bridled tern¹
- brown booby¹
- brown pelican¹
- common tern¹
- Cory's shearwater¹
- Forster's tern¹
- great shearwater¹
- gull-billed tern¹
- herring gull¹
- laughing gull¹
- Leach's storm-petrel¹
- magnificent frigatebird¹
- masked booby¹
- parasitic jaeger¹
- red-billed tropicbird¹
- red-footed booby¹
- ring-billed gull¹
- roseate tern¹
- royal tern¹
- sandwich tern¹
- sooty tern¹

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- American kestrel
 - black-crowned night-heron
 - blue-winged teal
 - cattle egret
 - chimney swift
 - cliff swallow
 - common yellowthroat
 - Eurasian collared-dove
 - great blue heron
 - great egret
 - green heron
 - hooded warbler

- indigo bunting
- little blue heron
- Louisiana waterthrush
- merlin
- osprey
- peregrine falcon
- prothonotary warbler
- ruby-throated hummingbird
- scarlet tanager
- snowy egret
- tree swallow
- yellow warbler

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