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Breeding records of the Sooty Tern in Tamaulipas and its distribution on the Gulf of Mexico

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Abstract

We report records of the Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) in nine localities within the Laguna Madre, Tamaulipas, México. Individual birds and pairs were observed in several islands and five breeding pairs were located nesting in Isla La Coyota in May 2000. Also, we report specimen data from the Laguna Madre and Tampico. Data presented herein suggest that scattered breeding colonies may be present in other islands on the Laguna Madre, and that the breeding range of the species in the Gulf of Mexico extends along the northern coast to at least central Tamaulipas.

Keywords: Sooty Tern, distribution, Tamaulipas, Gulf of Mexico.

Resumen

Registro de anidación de *Sterna fuscata* en Tamaulipas y su distribución en el Golfo de México

Se mencionan registros de la golondrina marina oscura (*Sterna fuscata*) en nueve localidades en la Laguna Madre, Tamaulipas, México. Individuos y parejas fueron detectados varias veces en diferentes islas de la zona, siendo registradas cinco parejas andantes en Isla La Coyota el 23 mayo del 2000. También se reportan datos de especímenes obtenidos en la Laguna Madre y Tampico. Los datos aquí presentados sugieren que existen colonias de reproducción dispersas en otras islas en la Laguna Madre y que la distribución de reproducción de la especie en el Golfo de México se extiende a lo largo de la costa norte al menos hasta el centro de Tamaulipas.

Palabras clave: Golondrina marina oscura, distribución, Tamaulipas, Golfo de México.

Résumé

Observations de nidification de Sterne fuligineuse à Tamaulipas et sa distribution dans le Golfe du Mexique

Cet article documente les observations de Sterne fuligineuse (*Sterna fuscata*) pour 9 localités de la Laguna Madre, Tamaulipas, Mexique. Des individus isolés et des couples ont été détectés à plusieurs reprises sur différentes îles de la région, d'où 5 couples nicheurs furent observés sur l'île La Coyota durant le mois de mai 2000. Nous reportons aussi les observations réalisées pour la Laguna Madre et Tampico. Les données présentées dans cet article nous laisse penser qu'il existe d'autres colonies de reproduction dispersées sur les îles de la Laguna Madre, et que cette espèce est présente dans le Golfe du Mexique sur la côte nord jusqu'au centre de l'état de Tamaulipas.

Mots clés: Sterne fuligineuse, distribution, Tamaulipas, Golfe du Mexique.

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The Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) is primarily a pelagic species that breeds on islands and sandy beaches of the Tropics. The breeding distribution ranges from the islands off western Mexico to the Galapagos and Australia in the Pacific, and in the Atlantic along the coast of Texas, Florida, Louisiana, and the Caribbean south to Brazil. Individuals wander widely during the non-breeding season (del Hoyo et al. 1996, AOU 1998). In Mexico, the species has been recorded on several islands and is known to breed in scattered colonies in the Revillagigedo, Marias, Isabel, and Clipperton Islands in the Pacific (*S. f. crissalis*; Friedmann et al. 1950, Howell and Webb 1995, Rebón 2000), and in offshore islands along the coast of the eastern Yucatán Peninsula (*S. f. fuscata*; Sada 1989, AOU 1998; Fig. 1). Although it has been suggested that adults breeding in the Caribbean disperse into the Gulf of Mexico (del Hoyo et al. 1996), Sooty Tern presence in this region

outside coastal United States, has been undocumented except for a vagrant in Los Tuxtlas region, southern Veracruz (Winker et al. 1992), and an inland record in Nuevo León, attributed to a bird that was blown to the mainland by hurricane Allen in August 1980 (Contreras-Balderas and García-Salas 1989). Herein, we report breeding records of the Sooty Tern (*S. fuscata fuscata*) in the Laguna Madre, Tamaulipas, Mexico, and discuss the geographic distribution of the species in the Gulf of Mexico.

Method

Our registers were done during fieldwork developed for surveying the avifauna of the Laguna Madre, from May 2000 to September 2001. This coastal lagoon is the largest in Mexico, with an area of 9055 km² (García-Marín 1981). Almost 220 species of birds have been

recorded in this area, a major wintering, stopover, and breeding area for 26 species of waterfowl and many species of shorebirds, raptors, and passerines (Sibbing et al. 1992, Contreras-Balderas 1993, Contreras-Balderas et al. 1990).

Observations

Records of individuals of the Sooty Tern were obtained in nine localities within the area (Fig. 2a): Ejido La Capilla, La Puntilla (18 and 20 May 2000, 23.36 N - 97.45 W; one individual in both dates); Centro Pesquero Las Higuierillas (2 September 2000, 25.26 N - 97.44 W; one adult following a fishing boat together with other larids); Puerto El Mezquital (2 September 2000, 25.24 N - 97.44 W; one individual); Isla Mano de León (2 September 2000,); Isla El Ranchito (1 September 2000, 25.28 N - 97.62 W; one individual in the beach); Isla El Ebanal (1 September 2000, 25.31 N - 97.65 W; two adults flying over the island); La Isla La Florida (1 September 2000, 25.30 N - 97.62 W; one individual); Isla La Coyota (23 May 2000 and 9 July 2001, 24.62 N - 97.78 W; breeding pairs, see below); and Rancho Chapeño (1 September 2000, 25.37 N - 97.66 W; two adults).

We also found a small breeding colony of five pairs nesting in the halophyllous vegetation on La Coyota

Island, 23 May 2000. The pairs were located in the middle of the island among nesting colonies of other larids: Caspian Tern (*S. caspia*), Forster's Tern (*S. forsteri*), Royal Tern (*S. maxima*), Gull-billed Tern (*S. nilotica*), and Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*), most of which, including Sooty Tern, were incubating eggs. Some species (*S. maxima*, *S. caspia*) were feeding recently hatched chicks. A voucher specimen of *S. fuscata* was collected and deposited in the zoological collection of the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas (UATA 272, adult female in breeding condition; ovaries 12 x 6 mm; largest follicle 2.5 mm; weight 205 g. Fig. 2b). Two additional specimens exist for Tamaulipas and are hitherto unreported in the literature (e.g., Friedmann et al. 1950, Howell and Webb 1995, del Hoyo et al. 1996); both were collected in Tampico by F. B. Armstrong on 18 May and 18 November 1888 and are deposited at the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh (CM 22787-88). These specimens represent the only vouchered records for Tamaulipas, and some of the few records from the inner Gulf of Mexico

Again on 9 July 2000, we visited the same island and only two adult individuals were found flying over the island; however, we were not able to confirm they were a nesting pair. Most of the other species of larids were breeding in the area (the same species mentioned above

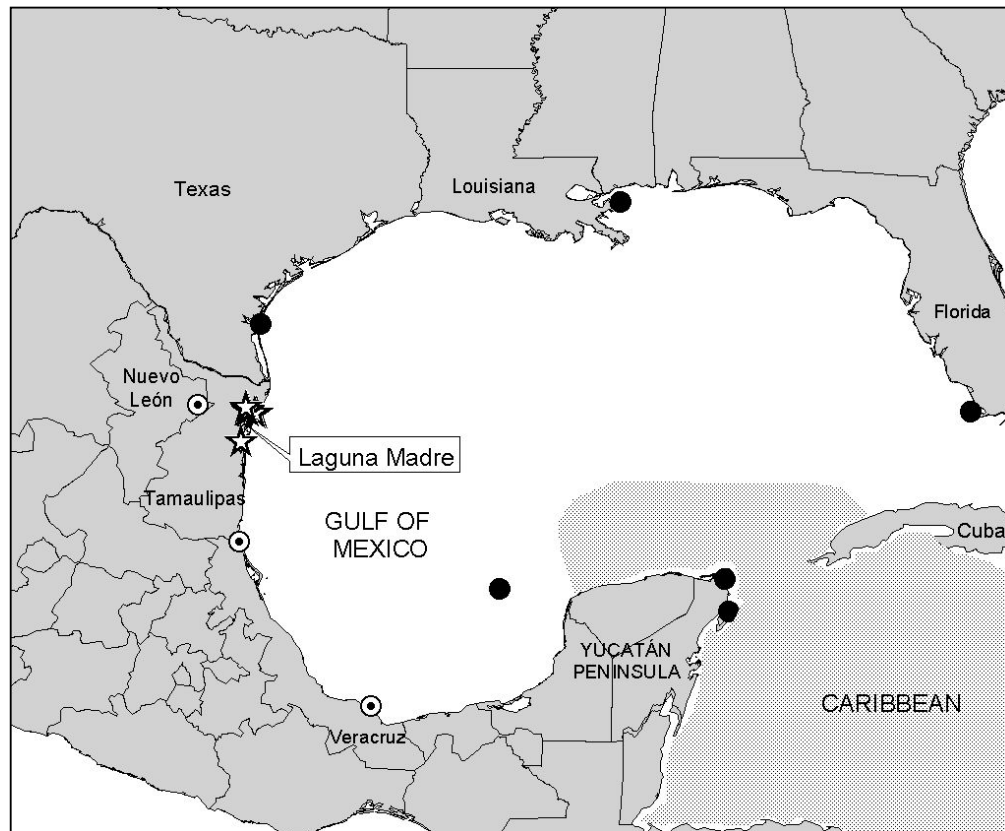


Figura 1. Distribution of the Sooty Tern (*S. f. fuscata*) in the Gulf of Mexico. Black circles indicate breeding records in southeastern USA and Mexico; dotted circles indicate non-breeding records along eastern Mexico (AOU 1998, Howell and Webb 1995, CM species). The localities in Tamaulipas reported herein are depicted as stars. Shaded area depicts range of the species in the Atlantic region of Mesoamerica as in Howell and Webb (1995).

plus Black Skimmer, *Rynchops niger*) and feeding fledglings, suggesting that the breeding season was almost over also for Sooty Tern and for the rest of the species.

Discussion

The status of the Sooty Tern along the Atlantic coast of North America is still poorly known. Data presented herein suggest that scattered breeding pairs may be also present in other islands on the Laguna Madre and that the breeding range extends from Florida along the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico south at least to central Tamaulipas. Of 29 islands visited during the fieldwork, four had major nesting colonies for larids and other shorebirds (Garza-Torres pers. obs.), but most suitable breeding sites have been severely transformed by human activities. Also, affirmation that the species may be widely distributed in the Gulf of Mexico during non-breeding season, as suggested by del Hoyo et al. (1996), is supported. However, the composition of the non-breeding individuals within the Gulf of Mexico is likely to be a mixture of individuals from breeding populations of the Caribbean with those breeding in southeastern USA and Mexico. Then, possibly the juvenile recorded in Nuevo León following Hurricane Allen (Contreras-Balderas and García-Salas 1989) may have originated from the breeding Tamaulipas populations.

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Figure 2. a) Sooty Tern photographed in the Laguna Madre, Tamaulipas, May 2002 (Photo: Héctor A. Garza); b) voucher specimen (UATA 272).



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