

BROWN BOOBIES ON LONG ISLAND

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During the fall of 1975, seven sightings of Brown Boobies (*Sula leucogaster*) were reported from the south shore of Long Island, New York. This number is unprecedented since only three previous occurrences are known, the last in 1949 (Bull, *Birds of the New York Area*, Harper and Row, New York 1964). The influx does not seem attributable to any specific weather event.

The Brown Booby breeds north to the West Indies including the Bahamas, but is only casual in Florida and Bermuda according to the AOU Checklist of North American Birds (American Ornithologist's Union, 1957). Palmer (*Handbook of North American Birds*, Volume 1, Yale University Press, 1962) called it an occasional autumn visitor to Bermuda. The AOU Checklist cites accidental occurrences in Massachusetts (Cape Cod), New York (Long Island) and South Carolina. Apparently all these northward displacements were associated with hurricanes.

The present incursion was first noted on September 28 when Dennis Puleston and William Graves observed a single adult at long range flying westward over Bellport Bay opposite Brookhaven. Weather was clear and visibility good. The shape, color pattern and manner of flight were seen clearly enough to determine identity. Puleston is very familiar with the species, having spent much time in tropical waters, including a recent extended visit to the Caribbean where Brown Boobies were seen frequently.

The second observation was made by the writer in the early afternoon on September 30 at Tiana Beach, across Shinnecock Bay from Hampton Bays. Visibility was good. A 20x Bausch and Lomb telescope had been set up when two adult Brown Boobies were observed flying from west to east over the ocean parallel to the shore. One bird was spotted first well to the west, checked with 7x binoculars, immediately recognized and then followed with the telescope as it flew past and continued eastward out of sight. When the first bird was about opposite the observer, the second bird caught up with it, after which they flew close together. The birds were two to three hundred yards offshore and about fifty feet above the water, but all details were clearly visible including the typical booby shape, long pointed wings and tail and heavy bill. The entire upper parts and

breast were dark brown with a sharp line of demarcation between the breast and the white belly. The white extended out beneath the wings and tail. The exact color of the bill could not be made out but it was light in contrast to the dark foreparts. The flight consisted of alternate periods of flapping and gliding. The bird was definitely smaller than a Gannet but larger than a Herring Gull. The observer had previously seen Brown Boobies in the tropical Pacific.

The next observation was made on October 2 by David L. Larsen from the breakwater at Shinnecock Inlet, about two miles east of Tiana. Two adults were seen flying east over the ocean and compared for size with nearby Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. Larsen is a careful and experienced observer and furnished a written account of his observation too detailed to be included here. His account leaves no doubt concerning his identification.

On October 6, Robert O. Paxton, another experienced observer, saw a single adult flying west just beyond the surf at Gilgo Beach, about fifty miles west of Shinnecock Bay. He also furnished a detailed written account which establishes identity beyond question.

On October 12, a few miles further west at Jones Beach, two adults were seen by Barbara Spencer, an active and competent observer, about 500 yards offshore. Convincing details were described over the telephone and the observation is probably correct, but confusion with Gannets at that distance is a possibility. Gannets had moved into the waters along the south shore in numbers the previous day, and remained common for several weeks. Some came close to shore and a few flew over the inlets and bays or crossed the barrier beach. Many were dark immatures but quite a few were in changing plumage with dark upperparts and whitish bellies, superficially resembling Brown Boobies. Such birds were seen by both the writer and by David Larsen.

On October 13, a single adult was reported flying southeast about one mile off Shinnecock Inlet by John McNeil. The bird was observed from a boat through 7x binoculars. McNeil is a less experienced birder but familiar with Gannets and aware of the differences between these and the booby. The bird was reasonably well described and the identification is probably correct, but the possibility of it being a Gannet in booby-like plumage cannot be completely ruled out.

The final observation differs from all the rest in that it involves two immature Brown Boobies, observed by Dennis Puleston and

Arthur Cooley, flying east about 200 yards out over the ocean at Smith's Point. The birds were watched at length and well described as all dark, lacking the lighter spotting typical of immature Gannets. This report would be discounted if made by an observer less familiar with the species than Puleston but is considered valid because of his experience with the species.

It may be noted that all observations were of birds flying, none feeding or resting. Their whereabouts between observations remains unknown since several observers searched the Shinnecock area many times in late September and October without success. The number of birds involved is uncertain but was at least four and probably five or more.

Unlike earlier occurrences, these were not clearly associated with a tropical storm. Hurricane Faye originated east of Bermuda and passed close to that island on September 26-27, 1975. It passed about 500 miles southeast of Montauk Point later on September 27 and was about 800 miles east on September 28. Faye was a small hurricane and did not traverse any area where appreciable numbers of Brown Boobies are known to occur. In addition, the time interval between its closest approach to Long Island and the appearance of the first booby seems too short to relate the two events.

Hurricane Gladys could be responsible for some of the later sightings. On September 28, it was located about 450 miles east-northeast of Puerto Rico. It passed 400 miles east of southern Florida but well beyond the Bahamas on October 1. It then passed about 200 miles east of Cape Hatteras and recurved passing about 250 miles southeast of Montauk on October 2. This storm did pass close to known Brown Booby territory and might have brought the birds seen after its passage. However, it was also a small hurricane, apparently did not displace any other species, and was not typical of larger storms which frequently bring numbers of southern species northward.

Thus, the cause of the influx cannot be established nor was much learned of the behavior of the birds observed. However, the observations reported mark this as the most extensive northward movement of Brown Boobies in the western North Atlantic.

Appreciation is expressed to all the observers who generously furnished details of their observations and gave permission for their use.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gilbert S. Raynor is a research meteorologist at Brookhaven National Laboratory and a graduate of Hofstra College. He became interested in birds early in life and has been a bird-bander since 1938. His interests include the birds of Long Island, the relationship of bird migration to weather, and weight variation in small birds. He is a member of several ornithological and conservation organizations and has published a number of papers. He is past president of Moriches Bay Audubon Society and a director of the Long Island Chapter of Nature Conservancy.