

A MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD IN CENTRAL NYS: FIRST RECORD FOR THE FINGER LAKES REGION

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On Sunday, 21 September 2008, Johnson and Billerman were returning to Ithaca from the New York State Ornithological Association meeting in Rochester and visited Myers Point in Lansing, NY to look for migrating shorebirds and waterbirds. The average birding pit stop at Myers is usually pretty uneventful, often lacking migrant waterbirds due to picnickers, windsurfers, or beachgoers. Over the years, however, this short gravel bar that juts out into the east side of Cayuga Lake has provided some remarkable bird records, including King Eider, Barrow's Goldeneye, Pacific Loon, Piping Plover, and Lark Bunting in recent years.

On this particular day, our visit to Myers Point was anything but uneventful. As we pulled into the parking lot at the spit, Johnson glanced south toward a small cove and noticed a large black bird with extremely long wings flying about 50 meters away with the usual flock of Ring-billed Gulls. Recognizing the bird, Johnson shouted, "FRIGATEBIRD, FRIGATEBIRD!!" interrupted by various expletives of an unprintable nature. We were able to watch the bird as it floated, facing into the north wind, at close range. The frigatebird slowly began moving north directly over the observers, and a series of close-range flight photographs were taken by both Johnson and Billerman. The bird circled overhead and banked, showing its upperwings; at this point, it was evident that the frigatebird was all black in plumage with only a slightly paler brown bar on the tertials and upperwing coverts. A small, deflated red gular sack was also visible. Although identifying out of range frigatebirds (*Fregata* sp.) can be difficult due to distance and poorly understood identifying characters (Sullivan *et al.* 2007), this individual was easily identified by the above characters as an adult male Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*).

The local birding phone chain was immediately put into action, and word of the frigatebird was circulated in short order. The frigatebird began to gain altitude and circled to the north of Myers Point over Salt Point and the mouth of Salmon Creek. It then set into a glide and headed south down the lake, disappearing toward Ithaca with remarkable speed given its initial plodding pace. Updating the phone chain, we joined a small army of birders spread out between East Shore Park and Stewart Park in Ithaca, about eight miles to the south of Myers, and waited for the frigatebird to appear from up the lake. In a short interval, the bird was refound as it came into Ithaca waters along the west side of Cayuga Lake and many other observers were able to view it. After circling at a distance for perhaps twenty minutes, the frigatebird turned back to the north and disappeared from view. Returning to Myers Point, several observers were able to get splendid views as the bird returned along its initial path, passing low over Myers Point (Fig. E, p. 53). After drifting several miles

to the north, the bird turned south again and headed back for Ithaca. Later in the evening, Bill Baker, Tim Lenz, and others were able to view the bird as it circled low overhead at Stewart Park (southeastern corner of Cayuga Lake). The bird disappeared inland over the Jetty Woods, and was later found roosting in a tree along the Cayuga Inlet by Lenz. More observers were able to watch the bird as it perched over the Inlet, and several noted that its posture was perhaps not typical for a healthy, energetic frigatebird.

Indeed, the next morning (22 September 2008), observers led by Jeff Gerbracht recovered the now-dead frigatebird from the water beneath the roost tree. The carcass was taken to the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates (CUMV) where it was prepared as a study skin and preserved in the ornithological collection.

Magnificent Frigatebird breeds off the west coast of Mexico from Baja California south to coastal Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, and on the Atlantic, from the Dry Tortugas (only US breeding site), south along the coast of Mexico, Central America and northern South America and Brazil. Non-breeding birds are regularly found along the coast in Florida and along the Gulf of Mexico from Florida to Texas, with vagrants moving farther up the coast (Diamond and Schreiber 2002).

In New York State, Magnificent Frigatebird is a rare vagrant. Levine (1998) lists 18 records, all coastal except for one at Derby Hill, Mexico, Oswego Co. 23 Sep 1990. Since 1998, there have been at least four additional records, all in Suffolk County: 2 Oct 2003 (NYSARC 2006), 6 Nov 2005 (NYSARC 2009), 26 Aug 2007 (KB 57: 355), and as recently as 7 Sep 2008 (p. 100; photo p. 53). Other reports of frigatebirds from neighboring states during fall 2008 include two from New Jersey (Cape May 8 Sep, Montclair hawkwatch 27 Oct: S. Barnes, pers. comm.) and two from Pennsylvania 20 Sep. Whereas the reports from 7-8 Sep were associated Tropical Storm *Hanna*, those from 20-21 Sep, including the one described above, were probably displaced inland by Hurricane *Ike*.

LITERATURE CITED

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