

BROWN BOOBY (*Sula leucogaster*) AT BUFFALO HARBOR: FIRST RECORD FOR UPSTATE NEW YORK AND THE GREAT LAKES

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At 11:15 a.m. on Monday, 7 October 2013, I was viewing Buffalo Harbor from the observation tower at Erie Basin Marina, located in the city of Buffalo, Erie County. The forecast that day had predicted strong winds out of the southwest, ideal conditions for observing wind-blown waterbirds at the eastern end of the lake. Skies were overcast with occasional rain showers, while winds were out of the WSW at 20-25 mph and waves on Lake Erie reached three to five feet. Large numbers of gulls were flying around in the strong winds, and the gravel spit located at the north end of Donnelly's Breakwall was covered with thousands of Double-crested Cormorants sheltering from the wind and rain. After 20 minutes of scanning with a Kowa TSN-883 spotting scope, I observed a juvenile Pomarine Jaeger out between the breakwalls as it headed towards the source of the Niagara River. After sending a text to the WNYBIRDS text alert system, local birder Sue Barth was the first to arrive hoping for a repeat pass by the jaeger.

After another hour of scanning, a distant waterbird came into view beyond the breakwalls as it coursed low over the water. It appeared dark above and light below with a thin body, long, thin wings, and stiff, shallow wing-beats that recalled a large tubenose such as an albatross, petrel, or shearwater. Immediately realizing no recent tropical storms had made landfall along the Atlantic coast, I practically dismissed the possibility of a tubenose being on the lake. Judging by the breakwalls, the bird was approximately three-quarters of a mile away, and I could barely make out what looked to be a tapered front and back, while the front now appeared entirely dark and well demarcated from the pale underparts. At this point, it was being followed by Herring Gulls and appeared slightly larger in direct comparison. Struggling to come to grips with what I was seeing, my mind went into panic mode as I could not figure out what this "thing" was! It seemed to resemble a Northern Gannet, but before I could get a handle on the ID, I lost sight of it due to the high winds and driving rain. Since the group of gulls that were following it eventually dissipated, I assumed it had landed on the water, where at that distance and in the large waves, it would have been impossible to see.

I spent a few minutes trying to describe what I saw to Sue, and in my mind faintly recalled the invasion of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies that was occurring in the southwestern United States. But in all reality I was by no means willing to give serious consideration to the idea that I had just seen a booby on Lake Erie. Trying to come to a reasonable conclusion, I defaulted on Northern Gannet, thinking that perhaps it was an immature in its second calendar year, considering what appeared to be a mixture of immature and adult plumage. This

seemed plausible in part by several recent sightings of an adult Northern Gannet on Lake Ontario, which is unusual since the majority of inland Northern Gannet sightings have pertained to juveniles. Although a rare occurrence, Northern Gannets have been recorded on Lake Erie; the apparent age of the bird was even more unexpected. Despite this, a sub-adult Northern Gannet seemed like the best explanation at the time.

Marginally satisfied with thinking the bird was a gannet, I headed back to my car to glance at a field guide. The second-year Northern Gannet in the *The Sibley Guide to Birds* did not fit well, as the illustration showed a bird with a predominantly white head and breast. In addition, the sharp contrast between the dark head and white underparts, plus the fairly small size continued to bother me. More importantly, I did not recall seeing any pale markings on the uppertail coverts, a feature that should have been apparent on an immature gannet. In the process I looked over the illustrations of Brown, Masked, and Blue-footed Boobies, but given the views, figured it was an unusually molting second-year Northern Gannet that had retained dark juvenile feathering across the head, neck, and breast. It was at this time Willie D'Anna and Betsy Potter arrived, and I explained that I had just seen what appeared to be a distant second-year gannet that jokingly "looked a lot like a Brown Booby."

The four of us set up our scopes near the base of the observation tower, using parts of the tower and nearby buildings as a wind and rain block. We were scoping for about five minutes when Betsy indicated that she was seeing something interesting out over the lake to the northwest. I picked up what appeared to be the bird in question, as it easily stood out by its combination of size, shape, and flight style. It was reasonably close this time, maybe 600 yards, and was actively flying due southeast directly towards us, while again being followed by Herring Gulls. It then turned towards the east, giving a clear profile view, and it was right at that moment it became immediately obvious the bird was an actual ADULT BROWN BOOBY! Clearly visible were the extremely long, thin wings; uniform dark upperparts; dark head and neck sharply demarcated from a white belly; long, tapered tail; and large, pale triangular bill. A necessary amount of expletives were yelled as it continued to fly east and then turn north as it neared the shoreline of LaSalle Park. After another ten seconds it then crossed over the Bird Island Pier breakwall and out into the lake where we lost sight of it in the distant waves.

Word about the booby was then put out on the text alert, Buffalo Ornithological Society one-call phone alert, and local Geneseebirds and Ontbirds birding listserves. In short order, several of the area's birders showed up at Erie Basin Marina and then later at other locations along the lake and river shores where brief, but definitive views and photographs (Fig. 1, p. 46) were had despite the difficult viewing conditions. The last observation made that day was early in the evening as the bird was viewed in-flight out over the lake near the historic Horseshoe Reef Lighthouse. The structure is a favored roosting location for Double-crested Cormorants, and this gave some hope that the bird might linger in the area.

Early the next morning in sunny and calm conditions, several observers at Erie Basin Marina watched as the booby flew into the harbor and made close passes up and down the shoreline before briefly perching on Donnelly's Breakwall. After disappearing for a few hours late morning, it was found back on the breakwall where it remained into the evening, and was enjoyed by a multitude of birders viewing from both the NY and Fort Erie, Ontario sides of the lake.

Arriving back at Erie Basin Marina on the afternoon of 9 October, I ran into a group of upstate New York birders that included Christopher Hollister, Thomas O'Donnell, Dominic Sherony, and Michael Tetlow. The four of them, along with Buffalo News photographer John Hickey were preparing to motor out into the harbor with boat owner Darryl Carr. I gratefully accepted an invitation to go along with them, and with the help of those viewing from shore the seven of us located the booby on Donnelly's Breakwall. Here we all enjoyed close, extended views and obtained several photographs of the bird as it sat on the breakwall and made a few passes around the boat (Figs. 2 & 3, pp. 46-47). For the next two weeks, daily observations were made from Erie Basin Marina and Fort Erie as the bird perched with cormorants on either the Horseshoe Reef Lighthouse or Donnelly's Breakwall. The last known sighting at Buffalo Harbor occurred on 24 October when it was seen perched on the lighthouse from the Fort Erie side of the lake.

Askildsen (1998) describes the status of Brown Booby in New York as a very rare summer and fall visitant to the offshore waters of Long Island, and lists 12 records, all coastal, two of which were reported after the passage of hurricanes. Since then, NYSARC has accepted two additional records, one at Robert Moses State Park, Fire Island, Suffolk Co., 4 November 1997 (H. Roth, L. Schore; NYSARC database), and one recently accepted from Cupsogue Beach County Park, Suffolk Co., 7 July 2012 (A. Gilbert, D. Rogers; A. Guthrie per comm.). Therefore the individual detailed in this article would provisionally represent the 15th valid record of Brown Booby for New York State and the first from upstate. Given that it was also observed across the international boundary on the Fort Erie, Ontario side of Lake Erie and the Niagara River, if accepted it would also represent the first record of the species for the province of Ontario, Canada.

As a follow-up to the observations made at Buffalo Harbor and Fort Erie, on 31 October Ken Burrell and fellow Long Point Bird Observatory colleagues were conducting a lakewatch from the tip of Long Point on the north Lake Erie shore in Ontario, approximately 75 miles to the west of Buffalo. That morning they observed an adult Brown Booby in-flight and then landing on the sand spit with Double-crested Cormorants. Burrell obtained photos of the bird that clearly showed it as an adult female and by the facial markings apparently the same individual last seen at Buffalo Harbor on 24 October. The bird was observed again at Long Point the following morning and was last seen flying ENE around mid-day. Late that afternoon it was then discovered by a Buffalo, NY area resident at his cottage property approximately 45 miles to the east of Long Point, at Mohawk Point near Lowbanks, Ontario. The resident contacted Gerry Rising

of Buffalo who in turn passed the word along to local Niagara Region birder Kayo Roy. Roy, Rising, and others observed the bird early the next morning on 2 November as it sat huddled in on the rocky shore of the lake, and preparations were made to capture and potentially rehabilitate it due to its apparent moribund state. Unexpectedly, around 9:25 a.m. the bird was startled by a loud passing vehicle and flew off; it was last seen heading due southwest out over Lake Erie.

In the western hemisphere, Brown Booby nests on islands throughout the tropics, and in the Atlantic the nominate subspecies *S.l. leucogaster* breeds in the Caribbean and southern Gulf of Mexico, and is found casually to Florida, Texas, Louisiana, Bermuda, and rarely north to New York and Nova Scotia. The Pacific subspecies *S.l. brewsteri* breeds from Baja California south to Ecuador, and is casual north to California, rarely to Oregon and Washington, and inland to western Arizona (Norton and Schrieber 2002). From the clean brown and white plumage it was apparent the bird was an adult, and from the yellowish face and gular with an isolated dark blue loreal spot, a female (Pyle 2008). Pyle then indicates that females of *S.l. leucogaster* show a pale bluish iris and a brown head and breast slightly darker or more blackish than the back, and *S.l. brewsteri* with a pale yellowish iris and a brown head and neck slightly paler and grayer than the back. Therefore, based on observations and photographs that clearly show a dark brown head and bluish eyes, the bird appears to represent the nominate Atlantic subspecies *S.l. leucogaster*.

Looking at past inland records across North America, there have been five other reports of Brown Booby away from the southwestern United States, with four of the five occurring within the last year, and interestingly all appearing to be adult females of the Atlantic subspecies *S.l. leucogaster*: Claytor Lake, Pulaski Co., Virginia, 4-28 October 2008; White Lake Wildlife Management Area, Warren Co., New Jersey, 27-31 July 2012; Lake Norrell, Saline Co., Arkansas, 9-21 August 2012; and Canyon Lake, Comal Co., Texas, 25 August-3 September 2012. Therefore the Brown Booby detailed in this article would represent the first record of the species for the Great Lakes.

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Scanning Donnelly's Breakwall from the Erie Basin Marina, 13 Oct 2013.
 Photo: S. S. Mitra.

Figures from “Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*) at Buffalo Harbor: First record for upstate New York and the Great Lakes” pp. 9-13.



Figure 1. Brown Booby (at bottom right just above water’s surface and flying right) followed by Herring Gulls. Buffalo Harbor, *Erie*, 7 Oct 2013. Photo: James Pawlicki.



Figure 2. Brown Booby at Buffalo Harbor, *Erie*, 9 Oct 2013. Photo: James Pawlicki



Figure 3. Brown Booby (and Double-crested Cormorant) on Donnelly’s Breakwall with a portion of the Buffalo city skyline in background. Buffalo Harbor, *Erie*, 9 Oct 2013. Photo: James Pawlicki.