

A BROWN BOOBY (*SULA LEUCOGASTER*) IN NEW YORK CITY DURING A REGION-WIDE INFLUX

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Abstract—Brown Boobies (*Sula leucogaster*) are pantropically distributed seabirds that are regularly found as vagrants in northeastern North America (Schreiber and Norton 2002). Here I detail the sighting and identification of an adult Brown Booby at The Narrows, a tidal strait between the New York City boroughs of Staten Island and Brooklyn. This observation represents the first record of this species within Richmond County waters, the third record for New York City overall, and one of the 19 records in northeastern North America during the year 2018.

The morning of 2 October 2018 was partly cloudy and warm, with temperatures expected to rise to 77 degrees Fahrenheit by mid-day. At about 0950 hrs, I was birding the northern shoreline of Fort Wadsworth, an active military installation and park within Gateway National Recreation Area, Staten Island Unit. I originally intended to search the brushy fields in the low-lying areas of the Fort, but my attention quickly turned to a large flock of gulls moving between The Narrows and the Lower New York Bay. At approximately 1010 hrs, the gulls moved to the Upper Bay from the base of the Verrazzano Bridge. While I scanned the flock, I noticed a dark-colored, long-winged bird flying south toward my location. As it flew closer, I noted its deep wing-beats, uniform chocolate-brown color on its upper-parts, and large pale bill and face. Realizing that the bird was a Brown Booby, I put my phone camera to the eyepiece of my binoculars and recorded about 15 seconds of it in flight before losing sight of the bird behind two large boats that were passing close to the shoreline. I turned to the Lower Bay to scan the nearby mixed flock of gulls but was unable to find the bird. After about an hour of searching with two other observers, the bird was not re-located, and in the following hours, no Brown Boobies were reported locally.

In identifying a Brown Booby in this area, the possibility of confusion with juvenile Northern Gannets (*Morus bassanus*) and juvenile Masked Boobies (*Sula dactylatra*) must be addressed. Although no Northern Gannets were reported in the Lower Bay on 2 October, they are seasonally quite common in the area, with up to several thousand individuals being seen at a time during the late-fall and winter months (pers. obs.). Unlike a juvenile Northern Gannet, the bird I observed had uniformly chocolate-brown upper-parts and lacked any white speckling or patches, as would be present on a subadult Northern Gannet (Harrison 1983, Sibley 2014). Masked Boobies have recently been found on at least two occasions in Massachusetts (e.g., 10 Sep 2015: Garvey *et al.* 2017),

Table 1. Records of vagrant Brown Boobies (*Sula leucogaster*) in northeastern North America in 2018, compiled using the eBird database (Sullivan *et al.* 2009).

Date(s)	Location	Age	eBird ID
25 Feb	Shark River Inlet, Monmouth, NJ	Juv	S43183410
28 May	Atlantic Ocean, Shelburne, NS	Juv	S46904956
2 Jun	Schoodic Island waters, Hancock, ME	Juv	S46236868
8 Jul	Atlantic Ocean, Halifax, NS	Ad	S47195082
23 Jul	Philadelphia Airport, Philadelphia, PA	Juv	S47371043
27 Jul	Gulf of St. Lawrence, QC	Ad	S47582019
30 Jul	Atlantic Ocean, Suffolk, NY	Ad	S47566187
30 Jul	Atlantic Ocean, Nantucket, MA	Ad	S47555678
4-28 Aug	Bay of Fundy, Digby, NS	Ad	S47674128
7 Aug	Menemsha Harbor, Dukes, MA	Juv	S47713131
14 Aug	Atlantic Ocean, Nantucket, MA	Ad	S47853933
17-20 Aug	Onota Lake, Berkshire, MA	Juv	S47898257
19 Aug	Race Point, Barnstable, MA	Juv	S47945822
27 Aug	Atlantic Ocean, Ocean, NJ	Ad	S48294755
2 Sep	Andrew's Point, Essex, MA	Ad	S48243843
7 Sep	Atlantic Ocean, Halifax, NS	Ad	S48749233
22-26 Sep	Cape Island, Cape May, NJ	Juv	S48668039
2 Oct	The Narrows, Richmond, NY	Ad	S48896928
8 Oct	Northumberland Strait, Pictou, NS	Juv	S49070371

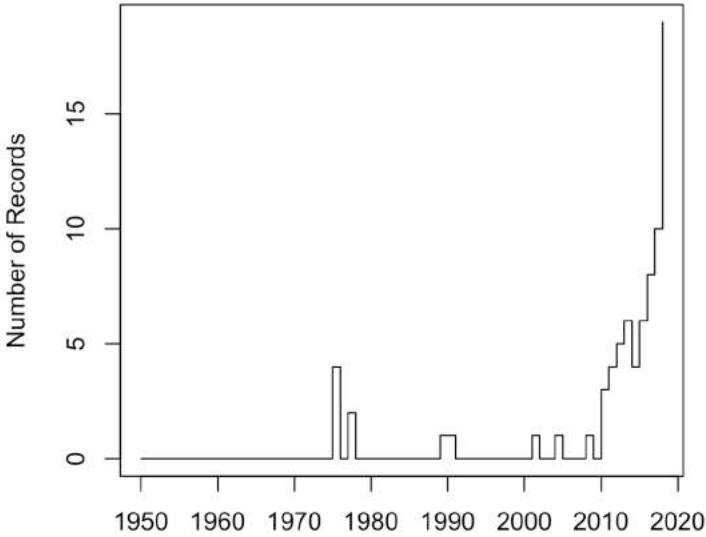


Figure 1. Records of vagrant Brown Boobies in northeastern North America 1950-2018.

twice in New Jersey (Wenzelburger 2004, Boyle 2011, Hanson *et al.* 2017), with possible sightings in Rhode Island (Nisbet *et al.* 2013) and New York (Schiff and Wollin 1995). A juvenile Masked Booby would show white uppertail coverts and a white collar, both of which this bird lacked (Harrison 1983, Sibley 2014). Given how low this bird was flying along the surface of the water, I was unable to get a clear view of its underside, but the completely pale bill is indicative of the bird being in at least its second-year (Pyle 2008). The video I was able to record, while not definitive in terms of separating Brown from Masked Booby due to the picture quality, shows a dark Booby with characteristic deep wing-beats, flying (and gliding) low over the water.

In northeastern North America, records of vagrant Brown Boobies date back to at least the mid- to late-nineteenth century, with the earliest specimens being collected in 1878 in Cape Cod, Massachusetts (Veit and Petersen 1993) and sometime prior to 1893 in Moriches Bay, New York (Dutcher 1893). A review of records from northeastern North America (Atlantic Canada, New England, New York, New Jersey; Tufts 1986; Veit and Petersen 1993; Levine 1998; Boyle 2011), demonstrates sharp increases in the number of records since the later-half of the twentieth century (Nisbet *et al.* 2013; see Figure 1), and in 2018 alone there were at least 19 reports of this species in the Northeast (Table 1). Of these reports, none were storm related, which is also true for most prior regional records of this species (Veit and Petersen 1993, Boyle 2011, Nisbet *et al.* 2013).

Vagrancy is often driven by population growth in some part of a species' range (Veit 2000, 2008). Although the last breeding seabird census conducted in the Caribbean reported a decline in their population (Bradley and Norton 2009), there is a possibility that, more recently, this population of Brown Boobies has grown, or that a more distant population might be the source for recent records in the Northeast. The increasing frequency of Brown Boobies in the Northeast might be related to climate change, which has been found to affect the at-sea distribution of seabirds worldwide (Hyrenbach and Veit 2003, Péron *et al.* 2010).

The sighting described here represents the first record of Brown Booby for Richmond County and the third record overall for New York City, with the previous two being from Queens; at Riis Beach, on 29 September 1977 (Richard and Chevalier 1978), and at Fort Tilden Beach on 29 August 2014 (NYSARC 2018).

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