

# General Field Notes

DAVID S. LEE

North Carolina Editor  
North Carolina State Museum  
P.O. Box 27647  
Raleigh, N.C. 27611

WILLIAM POST

South Carolina Editor  
The Charleston Museum  
360 Meeting Street  
Charleston, S.C. 29403

## Occurrence and Nesting of the Sooty Tern in North Carolina on the Lower Cape Fear River

MARK A. SHIELDS

JAMES F. PARNELL

Department of Biology  
University of North Carolina at Wilmington  
Wilmington, N.C. 28403

On 30 April 1982, while visiting a colonial waterbird breeding colony on a dredged-material island in the lower Cape Fear River, New Hanover County, N.C., Parnell found an adult Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) on the ground in a grassy area near the edge of a Laughing Gull (*Larus arcticus*) colony. Thinking the tern was ill or injured, he picked it up and discovered a single egg on the ground beneath the bird. The nest, a slight depression in the sand, was lined with a few blades of grass and was lightly covered by blades of Salt-meadow Cordgrass (*Spartina patens*). Both the tern and its egg were photographed, and the bird was quickly placed back on its nest, where it resumed incubation. Copies of the photograph have been deposited at the North Carolina State Museum of Natural History. When the island was next visited on 3 May, the tern was present but its egg was missing. The Laughing Gull colony had expanded into the area of the tern nest, and gull predation was probably responsible for the disappearance of the Sooty Tern egg. The tern was not sighted on several subsequent trips to the island.

On 13 April 1983, Shields observed an adult Sooty Tern while conducting a survey of a colonial waterbird nesting colony on another dredged-material island in the Cape Fear River, several km downstream from the 1982 Sooty Tern nesting site and in Brunswick County. This tern was first noticed as it circled overhead, calling loudly, with a group of Laughing Gulls, suggesting that it may have been defending its nesting area. The tern alighted several times on a piece of driftwood in a grassy area at the edge of the beach. An intensive search of this area revealed no Sooty Tern nest. The tern was not seen during a brief visit to the island on 22 April, but was observed again on 3 and 4 June perched on the same piece of driftwood as before. Another search of the grassy area around the driftwood produced no nest. The bird was not seen again after 4 June.

Another sighting of an adult Sooty Tern was made by Shields on 25 April 1984 on the island in Brunswick County. This tern, possibly the same one seen the previous year,

exhibited behavior similar to that observed in 1983, but again no nest was found. The Sooty Tern was still present in mid-May when this note was submitted for publication.

Several aspects of our observations are noteworthy. First, the Sooty Tern nest discovered in 1982 is only the second confirmed nesting attempt in North Carolina by this species, whose normal breeding grounds are about 1000 km to the south (A.O.U. Check-list, 1983). Second, the nest in New Hanover County was quite similar to the first nest of this species found in North Carolina at Morgan Island, Carteret County, in 1978 (Fussell et al. 1981). Both were located on dredged-material islands occupied by nesting colonial waterbirds, and both nests were placed in grassy areas associated with nesting Laughing Gulls, away from the bare domes occupied by other nesting tern species. Both nests were also apparently destroyed by Laughing Gulls. Finally, the three sightings reported here are the only records of Sooty Terns along the North Carolina coast south of Cape Lookout that were not associated with the passage of tropical storms. They are also the earliest sightings of Sooty Terns in North Carolina, with the exception of the first record of this species in the state on 16 March 1869 (Pearson et al. 1942, Lee and Booth 1979).

#### LITERATURE CITED

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### **Red-bellied Woodpecker Predation on Nestling Nuthatches**

MICHAEL L. DUNN

Cliffs of the Neuse State Park

Route 2, Box 50

Seven Springs, N.C. 28578

While canoeing in Lassiter Swamp above Merchants Millpond, Gates County, N.C., on 21 April 1982, I heard a disturbance in a tree along the creek. This was followed by a splash in the water behind the tree and additional shrill cries from above. When I finally had the tree in view, I could see a male Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*) probing repeatedly into a hole in a gnarl approximately 30 feet up in a Tupelo Gum (*Nyssa aquatica*). After several tries (with continued distress calls coming from inside the cavity), the woodpecker pulled a nestling from the hole. At this time a White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*) arrived on the side of the gnarl. It was carrying a food item, apparently a caterpillar. Giving its characteristic note, the nuthatch moved about the gnarl in an agitated manner. The woodpecker then flew to a nearby upward-sloping branch, carrying the nestling, which it apparently ate with rapid jabs that continued for 2 or 3 minutes. The remains of the nestling, however, were not visible from below after the woodpecker flew away. Investigating the source of the splash