

General Field Notes

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Attempted Interspecific Food Piracy by Fish Crows of an Osprey

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I watched Fish Crows (*Corvus ossifragus*) attempt to steal a fish from an immature Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) from 1059 to 1119 h on 7 October 1988 at Mt. Pleasant, Charleston County, S.C. The weather was fair, the temperature was about 16°C, and a 8 km NE wind was blowing.

At 1059 h, an immature Osprey in Charleston Harbor flew past me with a fish locked in the talons of both claws, followed 30 m away by one silent Fish Crow. The Osprey landed on a small oyster bank 100 m away from me. The Fish Crow also landed on the oyster bank, 3 m behind the Osprey. I detected no external damage to the fish, suggesting the Osprey had caught the fish recently.

The Fish Crow was soon joined by two more, and all of them closely attended the Osprey, occasionally approaching it within 1-2 m. Three times, the same Fish Crow attempted to alight on the Osprey's back, without landing. The Osprey responded by threatening the crows, without

releasing the fish, by opening the bill and thrusting its head and neck forward, and by feigning flight intention movements toward the crows. I could not hear either the Osprey or crows because of the distance and wind direction.

One to two Fish Crows left the oyster bank and were replaced by 1-2 more. I do not know if the original crow stayed. The Osprey began tearing off pieces of the fish and eating, but its feeding was regularly interrupted by crows, as described above.

Fish Crow numbers diminished to one, then none (briefly), then increased to three, until the group grew to seven, and finally twelve, I do not know if previously unsuccessful crows returned. Meanwhile, the Osprey continued to feed, with interruptions, until the middle of one side of the fish was eaten.

From 1115 until 1118 h, the crows became much more aggressive in their attempts to steal the fish from the Osprey. One crow repeatedly tried to hop onto the Osprey's back; the crow once touched the Osprey's head with its feet. Another crow directly approached the Osprey on the ground and was quickly repelled by the bill-snapping Osprey. Another crow pulled the Osprey's tail three times, each time with a visible tug. The Osprey reacted most strongly to this tail-pulling, lunging toward the nearest crows in the vicinity, but still not relinquishing hold of the fish. During these four minutes, the Osprey only tore off one piece of fish.

At 1119 h, the Osprey flew from the oyster bank with one claw grappling the partially eaten fish. The Osprey was followed by only one Fish Crow.

All but three crows left the oyster bank within one minute of the Osprey's departure, after they had investigated the area where the fish had lain. The crows probed the area with their bills, but I could not determine whether they ate any fish remains. The last of the three crows left at 1126 h.

Despite persistent efforts of Fish Crows to steal the fish from this immature Osprey, the larger and more powerful hawk successfully avoided food piracy by Fish Crows. The Osprey may have been more vulnerable to attempted food piracy because it was an immature. Also, the Osprey's feeding on the ground probably facilitated the Fish Crow's behavior. I did not see any of the Fish Crows mob the Osprey before the attempted food piracy. Brockmann and Barnard (1979) do not list the Fish Crow as a food pirate in their comprehensive review of avian food piracy, though Wetmore (*in* Fink, 1975) remarks that Fish Crows may 'dive-bomb gulls and terns, forcing these birds to drop their catches.'

Food piracy among Passeriformes is rare except for species of Corvidae, particularly members of the genus *Corvus* (Brockmann and Barnard, 1979). Thus, my observation of attempted food piracy by Fish Crows is not surprising. Species of *Corvus* pirate food from a variety of birds and mammals, including larger and more powerful species, and may employ tail-pulling to do so (Brockmann and Barnard, 1979, and references therein; Kilham, 1982, and references therein; Goodwin, 1976). Successful food piracy by corvids and other species may be correlated with the number of pursuing birds, though even one tail-pulling corvid can be successful (*op. cit.*; Bulkeley, 1987).

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Second Record of Little Gull In South Carolina

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On the morning of 23 March 1989 I observed an adult, winter-plumaged Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) in a small flock of Bonaparte's Gulls (*L. philadelphia*) foraging along the jetty at Huntington Beach State Park, S. C. First spotted at a distance of about 50 m., the birds passed within 7 m of me as I stood on the jetty, Total viewing time was 4 - 5 min. Observations were made with 7x binoculars. The following field marks were noted: black wing linings; pale gray back and dorsal wing surface with narrow white trailing edge on wing, including the outer primaries; white head with dark smudge on crown and small black spot behind eye; small, pointed black bill; white belly and tail; reddish feet. In addition, the bird was slightly smaller than the Bonaparte's Gulls and had rounded wing tips. The day was cool (40°F), windy, and overcast with intermittent light rain.

Johnstone (*Chat* 52:56, 1988) reported the first record of Little Gull in South Carolina on 14 March 1987 at sea off Charleston. LeGrand (*Chat* 53:47, 1989) states that "This gull appears regularly among the large flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls along the Outer Banks in late winter and early spring." Although Huntington Beach is about 400 km SW of Cape Hatteras on North Carolina's Outer Banks it would seem reasonable to expect more records of Little Gull in this area, especially in March.