

Masked Booby off Winyah Bay, South Carolina

Clay Sutton

129 Bucks Avenue

Cape May Court House, NJ 08210

Dennis Allen

Baruch Marine Field Laboratory

University of South Carolina

P.O. Box 1630

Georgetown, SC 29442

On 4 July 2002, at approximately 11:30 AM, we sighted an adult Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*) 18 miles (29 kilometers) off the mouth of Winyah Bay, Georgetown County, South Carolina.

While we were fishing on Allen's private boat, *Seriola*, at the Greenville Artificial Reef, located in 85 feet (26 meters) water, 18 statute miles southeast of the Winyah Bay jetties, the booby flew by the boat approximately 60 yards (55 meters) away. The sighting was brief but close, and made in full sunlight and calm seas. Winds were southwest at about 5 knots; skies were clear. The water temperature was in the high 70's F (ca. 25 ± C). The Masked Booby, a full adult showing some molt in the wings, was moving to the southwest, into the wind, using leisurely flapping flight low over the water. Also seen in the immediate vicinity were about a dozen Cory's Shearwaters and six or eight Wilson's Storm-petrels.

The Masked Booby appeared to be nearly as large as a Northern Gannet. It was pure white on the head, body, and upper wings. The flight feathers (primaries and secondaries) were black. The tail appeared dark. The amount (width) of black in the wings was extensive, indicating dark greater coverts as well.

While some third-year Northern Gannets will show dark secondaries contrasting with a mostly white upper wing, the dark coloration is restricted to the flight feathers, and is not on the coverts. Also this gannet plumage usually shows considerable darker mottling in the white areas, and a darkish collar. The Masked Booby we observed was "clean." Except for one or two shorter flight feathers (molt), the bird was "spotless." The bill appeared pale, and there was no yellowish or golden color on the head or neck as is generally seen in Northern Gannets in summer.

We believe we can eliminate the white morph of Red-footed Booby by the judged large size of the bird (Red-footed is the smallest of the boobies), and by the pale bill and lack of a yellowish wash on the head. While most of the observation was of the upper surface of the bird (which was low over the water), we believe the red feet and dark carpal patches of Red-footed Booby would have initially been visible if present.

Sutton has experience with Masked Booby from the Dry Tortugas (and one off North Carolina) and with Red-footed and Nazca Boobies from the Galapagos Islands. Allen has seen Masked Booby at the Tortugas on numerous occasions. We have both seen many thousands of Northern Gannets. We both concur with the identification made simultaneously yet

independently. Always remembered by Sutton will be Allen's initial surprised, alerting comment, "That's not a gannet."

Our Masked Booby sighting is one of an increasing number of reports from the Atlantic waters of South Carolina as more observers venture offshore. While Sprunt (*South Carolina Bird Life*, 1970) lists only one sighting, Post and Gauthreaux (*Status and Distribution of South Carolina Birds*, 1989) list two additional records, including one from 14 July 1983. Since then, *The Chat* has detailed two additional South Carolina records of Masked Booby. Accordingly, the Masked Booby should probably be considered to be a rare yet regular visitor to South Carolina offshore waters in summer.

What makes our sighting somewhat unusual is that even at 18 miles offshore, our bird was particularly close to land for Masked Booby, a bird more often associated with deeper Gulf Stream waters. Of interest, and perhaps related, was the observation of several species of warm-water fishes that day (in the same area), including sailfish, dolphin and mola mola, all species that are also usually associated with deeper, warmer, pelagic waters. We had a great day's fishing, but our excellent view of the Masked Booby made it a great birding day too.