

# LOUISIANA BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE

## REPORT FORM

1. **English and Scientific names:** Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*)
2. **Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage (e.g., 2 in alternate plumage):**  
June 27 = 3, 2 ad., 1 imm.; July 2 = 15, 7 ad, 7 imm., 1 ?.
3. **Locality: Parish:** St. Tammany  
**Specific Locality:** Lake Pontchartrain Causeway; 6/27 mile markers 13-16 from automobile; 7/2 mile marker 16.3-16.4 from boat.
4. **Date(s) when observed:** June 27, 2015; July 2, 2015
5. **Time(s) of day when observed:** 1300 h
6. **Reporting observer and address:** David P. Muth, 2765 Orchid St., New Orleans, LA 70119.
7. **Other observers accompanying reporter who also *identified* the bird(s):** Peter Yaukey 6/27; Yaukey and Steve Liffmann July 2.
8. **Other observers who *independently identified* the bird(s):** many.
9. **Light conditions (position of bird in relation to shade and to direction and amount of light):** sunny 6/27; late afternoon on 7/2 but decent light
10. **Optical equipment (type, power, condition):** Eagle Optics Platinum 10x42, Canon Powershot SX50 HS
11. **Distance to bird(s):** 10-200 yards.
12. **Duration of observation:** 30 m
13. **Habitat:** near center of Pontchartrain embayment bisected by causeway; water fresh to slightly brackish, green to greenish brown, semi-opaque to turbid on 6/27. Depth 12-15 feet.
14. **Behavior of bird / circumstances of observation (flying, feeding, resting; include and stress habits used in identification; relate events surrounding observation):** In flight or perched on ends of concrete girders, west side.

**15. Description (include only what was actually seen, *not what "should" have been seen*; include if possible: total length/relative size compared to other familiar species, body bulk, shape, proportions, bill, eye, leg, and plumage characteristics. Stress features that separate it from similar species):**

6/27--2 adult in close proximity mile marker (mm) 16 crossover at 1020; came up fast northbound close to bridge, circled, possibly landed on structure west side but lost to sight in any case. 1 imm mm 13 1105 northbound east side-- kept going; 220 1 ad mm 16 from moving vehicle, presumably one of the earlier adults.? Photos of all three. Stakeout. Typically shaped Sulids, adults rich brown with sharply demarcated line between brown neck and white belly and white underwing coverts contrasting with brown wing -- bills paler, one probably brighter yellow than the other (though in trying to obtain photos I did not have a chance to really look and photos equivocal) contrasting with brown heads. May be a pair. Immature brown, less richly colored, more nearly unicolored, but some contrast with belly. bill darker.

<http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S24079886>

7/02—We were searching for roosting birds as reported earlier by Seymour and O'Malley. Found at least 15 of them perched with prominent whitewash between mile marker 16.3-16.4 on west side—no whitewash anywhere else east or west sides; (mile markers are visible from lake and start on the south shore.)

<http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S24138367>

**Subject: [LABIRD-L] Brown Booby (15)**

**From: David Muth**

**Date: Thu, Jul 2, 2015, 10:23 PM**

**Peter Yaukey and I, along with Steven Liffmann, his boat, and his eagle-eyed daughter, surveyed the Causeway from the south shore to mile marker 23 and back between 5:30 and 8:30 p.m. today. Between mile marker 16.3 and 16.4, on the west side on the way out, we found 12 Brown Boobies roosting on the ends of the concrete girders. On the way back, we stopped again, and there were 15. There were at least 7 adults and 7 immatures. I believe the fifteenth bird was also an immature, in other words 7:8 ratios of adults to immatures, but they were very active, flushing, landing, circling, splitting up and re-forming the flock so that I sometimes seemed to get the opposite ratio. Just not positive.**

**We could not stay until dark to see if more joined the roost.**

**Fifteen Brown Boobies, together, in Lake Pontchartrain.**

**By the way, water color was much better today, green on the south half, and a clear (not muddy) brown near the roost. There was no detectable salt taste in the water, suggesting salinities less than 5 parts per thousand-barely qualifying as brackish at best.**

**David Muth  
New Orleans**

**Subject: [LABIRD-L] Brown Booby mystery**  
**From: David Muth**  
**Date: Mon, Jun 29, 2015, 5:43 PM**

LABIRD:

I want to make sure that this Brown Booby event is placed into some kind of context. It is certainly true that Lake Pontchartrain is full of prey, and it is true that this is a good year for game fish in the lake. But if all it took to lure Brown Boobies into coastal bays was prey, then they'd be all over coastal bays. There have always been cycles which at their peak meant plenty of fish in Lake Pontchartrain, and there is often abundant food in Barataria Bay, and Breton Sound, and all along our coast, and, indeed, in bays all over the world. But Brown Boobies are historically all but unknown in the coastal bays of the United States.

Brown Boobies are pantropical, live in blue or blue-green water and are thought by some to be flying fish specialists (though they eat other fish). In my (admittedly limited) experience, even in places where they are routinely seen from shore away from remote nesting colonies, like the Yucatan, the water is clear. Lake Pontchartrain is opaque brown water, not blue water, not even very salty water, especially this year; it is not in the tropics; and there are no flying fish.

Before 2013 there were essentially no non-storm related non-coastal records of Brown Booby for Louisiana (I don't have all my references to hand--I'm not sure how many storm records there were, if any). There were a tiny handful of pelagic records, and one or two beach strandings, and a bird or two found during the atlas on remote offshore islands in 2008. But nothing as far inland as lakes Pontchartrain or Calcasieu, and very few coastal records since the early 20th century. Nothing at all in coastal bays.

Then, on August 31, 2013 one was seen in the Mississippi River below Venice. That one was at least close to the Gulf, but still utterly unexpected. Then in late October-early November 2013 the group of 3 was documented in Lake Calcasieu. Completely unprecedented.

Then the bird was found on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain at Madisonville during the CBC Dec. 27, 2013. That bird was seen by numerous observers into early January 2015. On January 6-7 the temperature dropped into the upper 20s with howling north winds and that should have been that for a tropical bird. But no, a Brown Booby was seen flying near the south shore the morning of the 7th, apparently having survived the freezing night.

I am unaware of any sightings on the lake between January 2014 and January 2015, though another was reported on the river down in the Bird's Foot Dec. 2, 2014. Then one was seen from the Causeway Jan 2, 2015 and then two days later FOUR were seen from the north shore at Lewisburg. It got weirder, with sightings of a bird in the middle of the Maurepas swamp from I-10 April 7--so unlike Brown Booby habitat and behavior as to be surreal--like finding a Snow Bunting hopping around on the nature trail in the middle of the Honey Island swamp.

Since March 2015 hardly a week goes by without reports from the Causeway, with the highest count so far being 7. In the meantime 2 were seen near the river at Diamond April 11. Oh, and a bird was seen following geese in the rice fields...

None of this makes any sense. Hurricane Isaac was in 2012, more than a year before the first sightings. Not a single tropical cyclone made landfall on the northern Gulf Coast west of the Florida Big Bend region in 2013. A very weak Karen dissipated off the Louisiana coast in October 2013, but Brown Boobies don't get blown in during the big ones, much less during a tropical depression offshore. If you posit that the boobies entered Lake Pontchartrain during Isaac

and just remained undetected, that doesn't help with the birds in Lake Calcasieu, or the birds in the Mississippi River.

Why don't they leave? Do they leave and come back? Are they surviving the winters? Do they leave when it gets brutally cold and then come back? Then why are they never seen from the I-10 bridge to Slidell which is heavily commuted by birders? Are they 'afraid' to leave the lake, 'afraid' or unwilling to cross the railroad, Hwy 11 and I-10 bridges, afraid of the narrow Chef and Rigolets passes? If so, how come they can cross the Causeway, even perch on it? Are they just inept when it comes to finding a way out? A booby would not have to soar very high up to be able to see Mississippi Sound from the east end of the lake. Was the bird seen from I-10 along Hope Canal in the middle of the swamp exploring, looking for a way out? And if they can do that, and either negotiated Pass Manchac and I-55, Hwy 51, and the RR to get into Lake Maurepas or flew overland, then why not just fly over the eastern causeway bridges and out the wider, saltier passes to the Gulf?

My first hypothesis was Gulf birds exposed to BP oil--gone a little loco. I'm not ready to rule that out, but the truth is that records of Brown Boobies in odd places are accumulating from Southern California to the Canadian Maritimes, with stops at places like Niagara Falls.

I'm stumped. Obviously there is an explanation. Maybe the 20th century had been an anomaly, maybe the behavior isn't that strange, maybe we are seeing outliers of a recovering Caribbean/Gulf population. I hope so. Among boobies Browns seem among the most comfortable foraging in shallower water near shore. They like to perch--on man-made as well as natural structures. Maybe we are seeing the beginning of a trend, and we'll start to think of this as routine, like Calliope Hummingbirds in winter in Louisiana (none of us thought that would become routine when Ron Stein found the first record in Louisiana in 1982. Those of us lucky enough to see it marked it down as probably a once in a lifetime event).

But maybe this is an anomaly. Maybe we'll never figure out why it happened. Maybe in twenty years birders will look back on this sequence of sightings as exceptional, and with envy.

David Muth  
New Orleans

**16. Voice: quiet**

**17. Similar species (include how they were eliminated by your observation):** Adults and immatures with adult shadow patterns are not matched by any other sulid in Gulf.

**18. Photographs or tape recordings obtained? (by whom? attached?):** yes







**11 at once.**

**19. Previous experience with this species:** A few in Louisiana, and a few in Caribbean and Pacific off Central America.

**20. Identification aids: (list books, illustrations, other birders, etc. used in identification):**

**a. at time of observation:**

**b. after observation:** Ebird list; studying photos yes

**22. Are you positive of your identification if not, explain:** yes

**23. Date:** March 9, 2016

**24. May the LBRC have permission to display this report or portions of this report on its website?** yes

**If yes, may we include your name with the report?** yes