

First Illinois Record of the Black Skimmer

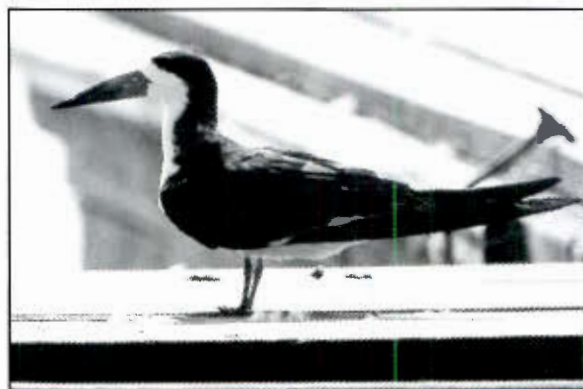
by Myrna Deaton

On 4 September 1998, I took a short detour through Nelson Park Marina on Lake Decatur on my way to work to check for migrants in the marina. The jetty in the marina has always been a favorite resting place for gulls and terns, and has produced many interesting birds over the years. As I pulled into the parking lot across the street from the jetty, I noticed a black bird wedged in among all the Ring-billed Gulls. The visible part of the bird was entirely black, with long pointed wings extending well beyond the tail. The bird was obviously much more short-legged than the gulls and appeared tern-like in shape.

This was definitely not one of the usual migrants.

As I reached excitedly for my binoculars, my mind raced through the short list of possibilities, neither of which had been recorded previously in Illinois: Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) and Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*). Hurricane Earl, which had finally made landfall the previous day after several days in the Gulf of Mexico, could have produced a vagrant of either species. When one of the gulls blocking my view of the black bird's head shifted positions, I got a glimpse of a black and white head, white underparts, and a large, oddly shaped red and black bill. The bird was a Black Skimmer!

I ran down to the jetty and was



able to get a clear view of the whole bird from less than 100 feet away. There was no identification challenge here; that large red and black bill with the lower mandible longer than the upper one is unique to the Black Skimmer. Knowing from experience that vagrant birds often do not stay long, I started calling other birders and returned home to get my camera. By the time I returned a few minutes later with the camera, Dick Sandburg had seen the bird and was making more phone calls to alert other Central Illinois birders. As we approached the jetty, all the birds flushed.

The skimmer was beautiful in flight, with graceful, fluid wingbeats. The underwings were almost entirely white, with black primary tips. The skimmer's wingspan was comparable to the Ring-billed Gulls. The size difference that was noticeable on sitting birds disappeared in flight. When flushed, the skimmer's call could be heard distinctly from the gulls. It reminded me of a small dog's "yap".

Fortunately, the birds sat again on a roof in the marina. The Black Skimmer wasn't hard to locate among all those white gulls. I was able to take some distant photographs before I had to reluctantly leave and drive to Springfield to work. Once in Springfield, I immediately contacted Dennis Oehmke so that he could try to get better photographs.

I returned later in the afternoon to find the skimmer back on the jetty and easily located by the flock of people with scopes and binoculars. We spent a pleasant summer evening watching the skimmer and chatting with passers-by on their evening stroll by the lake, encouraging scope views of this remarkable bird. There was a lot of discussion about the likely origin of the bird and why of all places it ended up on Lake Decatur.

By evening the skimmer seemed to want only to rest, and spent much of the time sleeping with its bill tucked.

Meadowlark