

Northern Gannet: Possible Fourth State Record and First Adult

14 August 1994 was a great day for birding in the Calumet area. Water levels had recently been drawn down at the "Big Marsh" (near 114th St. & Stony Island Ave. in Chicago, Cook County), and migrant shorebirds were present in profusion. On this date Cindy Alberico, Sue Friscia, Dennis Lane, Wes Serafin, Craig Thayer, and I surveyed the area for unusual shorebirds, and luck was with us. To be sure, numerous shorebirds were located, but two unexpected King Rails (one adult pointed out by Serafin, and the other simultaneously located by Friscia and Alberico at the opposite end of the marsh) added excitement to the morning's findings. While most of us were still ogling the rails, I glanced up momentarily to examine some of the gulls that were flying overhead.

I almost immediately located a bird flying high above which I tentatively identified as a Northern Gannet, only briefly equivocating to consider the possibility of American White Pelican which had recently been reported summering at nearby McGinnis Slough. Lane and the others, however, quickly reaffirmed my original identification - indeed, after even a few seconds inspection, the bird was obviously recognizable as an adult Northern Gannet (*Sula bassanus*).

The bird was flying high overhead. Because of the lack of objective reference points, exact distance was difficult to gauge, but it would be safe to guess the bird was at least 500-1,000 feet overhead. Size was difficult to judge, but it appeared to be a large bird, much larger than the many gulls present at various elevations. It was a heavy-bodied bird, with a long, sharp, very thick (light-colored) bill; long, pointed wings; and a long, pointed tail. The forward projection of the bird's head and bill were nearly equal in extent to the backward projection of the bird's sharp, pointed tail, which, when coupled with the bird's long pointed wings, contributed to an overall "cross-shaped" effect.

The bird's body plumage, including the tail, was pure white, except for the black primary wing feathers. Although there appeared to be at least some white in the primary under-wing coverts, the great distance involved contributed to the overall effect of a white wing with the distal half dipped in black paint.

Identification of the bird as an adult Northern Gannet was straightforward, as no other *sulid* fits the description given. Harrison's *Seabirds* (1985) indicates that worldwide, all other gannet and booby species show at least some dark feathering in the secondaries and/or tail, unlike the bird we observed.

The bird remained for only a minute or two. Alberico last noted the bird heading northeast, presumably toward Lake Michigan.

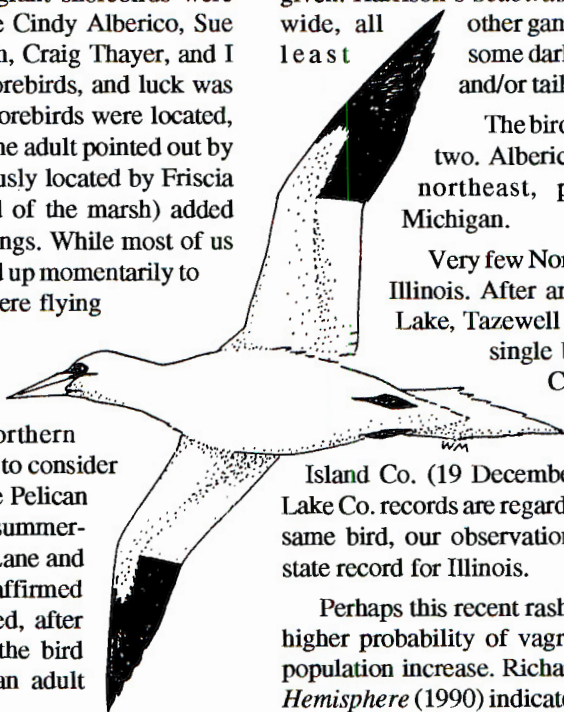
Very few Northern Gannet records exist for Illinois. After an initial sighting at Powerton Lake, Tazewell Co. (19-20 November 1983), single birds were noted at Chicago, Cook Co. (6 November 1993), Vernon Hills, Lake Co. (9 November 1993), and Rock Island Co. (19 December 1993). If the Chicago and Lake Co. records are regarded as multiple sightings of the same bird, our observation would represent the fourth state record for Illinois.

Perhaps this recent rash of sightings is the result of a higher probability of vagrancy caused by an objective population increase. Richards' *Seabirds of the Northern Hemisphere* (1990) indicates that the world population of Northern Gannets is increasing at an estimated 3 percent annually.

All prior Illinois Northern Gannet sightings have involved immature birds. Our observation constitutes the first sighting of an adult Northern Gannet for Illinois, a bird which, based on previous gannet records, was also slightly out of season (all previous Illinois gannet records have involved late fall or winter birds). Documentation of this bird is on file with the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC).

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Editor's Note: This sighting is in its second round of review by the IORC and has not yet been accepted.



*The Northern Gannet was seen at Lake Calumet's Big Marsh in Cook County on 14 August 1994.
Drawing by Walter Marcisz.*