

Annals of Pelagic Birding in Ohio: Magnificent Frigatebird

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No one who has watched frigatebirds can fail to appreciate their exquisite powers of flight. Their abilities to float motionless on a breath of air, or to maneuver aerobically to harass and rob other birds, are unmatched. Among all species in the bird kingdom, they possess the lowest ratio of body weight to area of wing surface. Seabirds that never deliberately alight on the water, nesters whose weak feet make them uncomfortable on the ground, they are truly creatures of the ocean of air.

Thus, though the world's five frigatebird species are sedentary as to their normal tropical ranges, they have ridden hurricane winds and other atmospheric disturbances to far distant climes. Three have been recorded in the US: great frigatebird *Fregata minor* (with one record in Oklahoma and two in California), lesser frigatebird *F. ariel* (one record in Maine), and the magnificent frigatebird *F. magnificens*. The latter is most familiar to US birders, with a year-round presence off Florida's shores, including nesting colonies in red mangroves at the Marquesas Keys through 1988 and since then at the Dry Tortugas.

The magnificent is the largest frigatebird and the least pelagic, breeding in the tropics of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Its North American occurrences beyond Florida—and there are many, extending to north to Newfoundland and Alaska and as far inland as Kansas—probably represent birds' encounters with weather favoring vagrancy. The predominance of records in the fall represents not post-breeding dispersal (frigatebirds breed throughout the year) so much as unsettled weather during hurricane season in the tropics. Of 39 records in 12 states and provinces in our inland region, all but three April records, three August records, and four records from July (one including a June date) occurred in September or October.

Ohio has four records of this species, three of them between late September and mid-October, and one from spring. Only one has come from near Lake Erie. Oliver Davie (1898) mentions the first record as follows: "A specimen, which is now in the possession of Dr. Renshaw, of Sugar Grove, Ohio, was taken by Mr. Emmet Adcock in Fairfield County, Ohio, in the spring of 1880." He offers no further details, and the specimen's whereabouts are unknown. Missing nineteenth-century specimens are a familiar story, but while probably this bird was correctly identified as to the genus *Fregata*, determination as to species is not easy even a century later (Howell 1994); absent the specimen or further written documentation one may legitimately doubt the conclusiveness of the identification in this case, even though *F. magnificens* is by far the likeliest candidate. This Ohio record was the first for the Midwest. Interestingly, first records for Kansas and Wisconsin also occurred in 1880, both in August.

Ohio's next two records came generations later, and on successive days. Trautman (1968) mentions "In a letter dated 10 November 1967 from Mr. Emerson Kemsies and from newspaper accounts I learned of the finding of the second Ohio record, a bird that had been 'picked up dead in an eastern suburb' of Cincinnati on 29 September." Randle (1981) reports the same record: "A second specimen is here at Cin. Mus. of Nat. History. This bird was brought in to the Cin. Zoo in expiring condition on 9-29-67...it had been found in a suburban yard flopping weakly." Ned Keller (pers. comm.) relates a 5 May 2003 conversation with John Ruthven as follows:

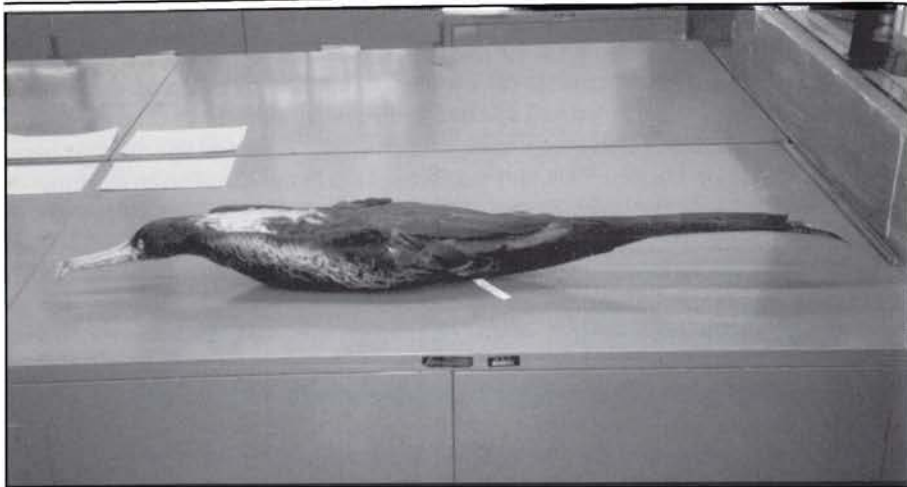
Emerson Kemsies called him, asking him to check on a call from a woman (he doesn't remember her name) who lived on Edwards Road, in Hyde Park, a neighborhood within the city of Cincinnati. She said that the bird was bigger than a breadbox, and she was afraid to approach it (still alive). By the time he got there, later that day, the bird had died. He took the bird home and put it in his freezer, and later took it to Kemsies at the University of Cincinnati, where he helped skin the bird. The stomach was empty, and there were no apparent physical injuries to the bird.

It is not hard to imagine the dread such a gigantic black bat-like bird, with its long hooked bill, might have caused as it struggled with death on someone's manicured lawn.

Hurricane *Beulah*, with winds peaking at 140 knots on 20 September 1967, had earlier swept through the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico, making landfall not far from Brownsville, Texas on 22 September; it may well have played a role in this bird's appearance in Ohio, as other Gulf hurricanes that headed north have brought frigatebirds to our region.

The following day another frigatebird was found. Trautman and Nye (1968) report it as follows:

*On 30 September 1967, while observing birds in the vicinity of Clear Fork Reservoir, Morrow County, Ohio, Nye saw a frigatebird as it soared or sat in a dead tree. The next day Dr. and Mrs. Edward S. Thomas saw it, and on 1 October Trautman and his wife collected the bird. It has been deposited in the state research collection as OSM No. 13510. The bird, an adult female, was greatly emaciated, weighing only 1253.2 g without the contents of its alimentary tract, which weighed an additional 356.6 g. These contents consisted of two white crappies (*Pomoxis annularis*) total lengths 256 mm and 175 mm; two yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*) 140 mm and 125 mm; and the posterior portion of a largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) 140 mm in length. These fishes appeared to have been dead before being swallowed by the bird, because there were traces of fungus and evidences of decomposition on two of them. All of the fishes were in the anterior portion of the alimentary tract, the stomach and posterior alimentary tract were empty.*



Specimen #13510 at The Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity. Collected 1 October 1967 at Clear Fork Reservoir in Morrow County by Milton Trautman.

Missing from the description of the stomach contents may have been fragments of the sandwiches the Trautmans took from their picnic basket and threw toward the bird from their rowboat, luring it close enough for Trautman to shoot it. Or so at least legend has it. Tales are also told that a distinguished birder arrived at the site that day with a carload of eager companions, just in time to see Trautman carrying the corpse of the frigatebird up from the shore. The specimen is at the OSU museum, and the tag data read as follows: "13510. Ohio. Troy Twp, NE Sec 9. @&. Milton B. Trautman, Mary A. Trautman. Thomas W. Nye. 2 Oct 1967. *F. m. rothschildi*. Thin. 1253.2 grams + stomach contents 356.6 grams. 1-10" and 17" *P. annularis* 2-6" *P. blenescens*¹, *M. salmoides*." The 2 October date is probably an error, as other contemporaneous sources in the *Auk* (quoted above) and the *Wheaton Club Bulletin* indicate 1 October as the date of collection. An attractively-prepared specimen, its wingspan of more than seven feet tightly furled umbrella-fashion, it measures 40-3/4" from bill tip to the ends of the tail streamers.

Thirty-one years later, an immature frigatebird appeared over East Harbor State Park, Ottawa Co., on a sunny Saturday (Conlon, 1998). Don Miles, a faculty member from Ohio University leading a field trip for ornithology students on the morning of 17 October 1998, reported their experience in this way:

We were observing birds from the causeway that leads from the park entrance to the beach. We had excellent views of East Harbor and Middle Harbor from our

¹ This seems to be a misreading of "*P. flavescens*." At times the Trautmans' practice was for him to enter tag data in pencil, which she later overwrote in archival ink (J. Condit, pers. comm.). A transcriptional error here seems plausible, as does, perhaps, also the entry of a different date than that published in *The Auk*.

location on the road. While we were observing the gulls in the East Harbor side of the road, a very large bird began to fly directly at us from the east. It was flying low (perhaps 7-8 meters above the water) and in a westerly direction. The bird banked and we got a fantastic view of the characteristic wing and tail shape of a frigatebird... Anderson and I identified it as a juvenile frigatebird and I was 100% confident that it was a juvenile magnificent frigatebird. Both Denise and I have been to Galapagos, Ecuador, and have observed many hundreds of frigatebirds, including great and magnificent frigatebirds. I carefully noted the plumage pattern of the bird as it flew directly over us. It had dark wings and tail, a completely white head (this is a key field mark), white neck and chest and white belly. Based on the plumage patterns, I would call the frigatebird we saw a first year bird. Juveniles of the great frigatebird tend to have a rusty tinge to the head feathers, which allows one to identify the two species with some confidence. The magnificent frigatebird circled over the Middle Harbor for a considerable period of time. It flew over a flock of Bonaparte's gulls, which immediately took flight and began to mob the frigatebird. We watched the frigatebird until 10:00 am. By this time it was moving toward the south and west. It was still seen flying over the Harbor at 10:30 am. We then proceeded to the beach to look for shorebirds and other waterbirds.

At about the same time, Adam Grimm was hunting waterfowl at the Park, and saw the bird. He was able to take a snapshot. He sketched a map of the bird's course over the area and his notes include the following details:

Date—Oct 17, 1998. Time—between 9:30 am and 10:00 am. Place: East Harbor State Park, seen from blind #5. Age—juvenile. Summary—the bird was just gliding around, moving very slowly. I think it was looking at our duck decoys (we were hunting at the time).



Ohio's most recent frigatebird, photographed by Adam Grimm at East Harbor State Park in Ottawa County, 17 October 1998.

Closer than one found at the foot of the western Virginia mountains, no other wandering magnificent frigatebirds were reported in the region at the time. The autumn of 1998 was remarkable for storm-displaced vagrants in Ohio, but it was sustained high winds later in mid-November that produced the most memorable records, with all-time high Ohio counts of greater white-fronted geese and Franklin's gulls, and a northern wheatear. As of this writing, the 1998 Ohio frigatebird remains the most recent recorded in the Midwest.

Most Midwestern records come from September of 1988, when Hurricane *Gilbert*, one of the most powerful storms of the twentieth century, with sustained winds in excess of 160 knots, reigned in the Gulf of Mexico. *Gilbert* ended as an extratropical depression drifting from El Paso to Chicago. During the latter half of that month and the first half of October, dozens of frigatebirds were reported out of range as waifs of this storm. Among first (and in many cases, only) state/provincial records (Hall et al., *American Birds* 43(1) *passim*) were frigatebirds in Tennessee, Iowa (two birds), Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan (three birds), Ontario, and West Virginia; among second state records were birds in Washington, Wisconsin, and Indiana (two birds). None was reported from Ohio, but given six records to our north in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ontario it seems reasonable to presume frigatebirds were over the state at some point. Ornithology classes and hunters able to recognize frigatebirds are not abroad every day, after all. The West Virginia bird was sighted heading up the Ohio River on 29 September, a couple of strong wing-beats from Ohio's Lawrence County bank.

Judging by records, magnificent frigatebirds are possible at our latitude in spring, summer, and especially fall. Even though the great majority of such sightings are of *F. magnificens*, other species are possible, and observers lucky enough to see a frigatebird in Ohio should take note of, and document, details such as shape and location of white on the underparts, presence of any cinnamon or rufous anywhere in the plumage or pale wing bars on the upper side, and soft parts coloration (see Howell 1994). And, as time permits, they should enjoy the sight of what may be the most highly perfected aerialist among the world's birds.

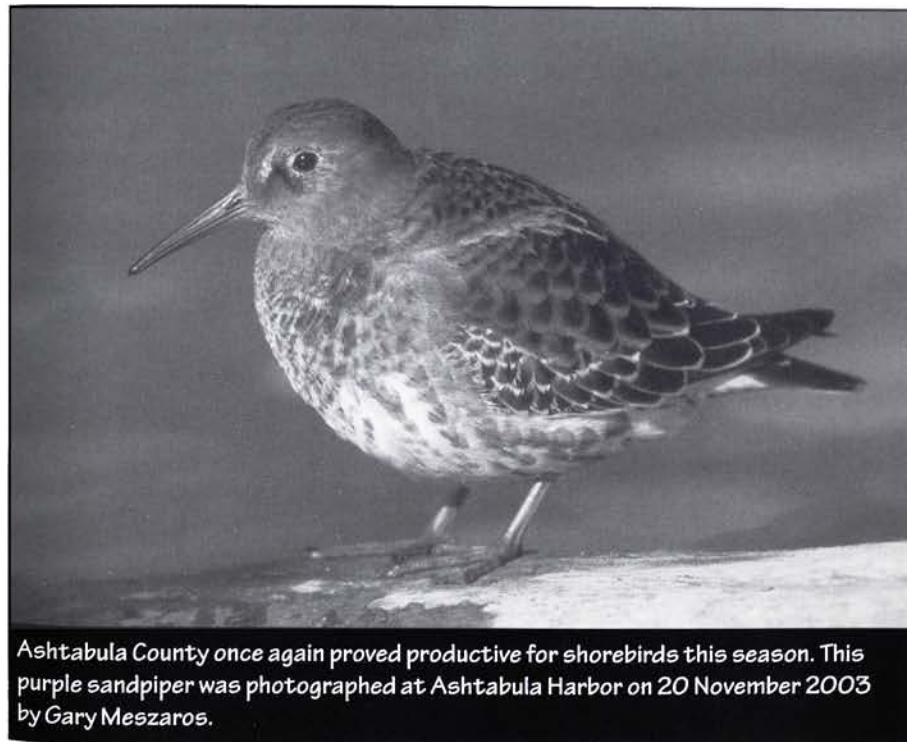
Acknowledgments

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Ashtabula County once again proved productive for shorebirds this season. This purple sandpiper was photographed at Ashtabula Harbor on 20 November 2003 by Gary Meszaros.