

OCCURRENCE OF BLACK SKIMMERS IN BAJA CALIFORNIA

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Although the Black Skimmer, *Rynchops niger*, is a familiar bird along the Pacific coast of mainland Mexico and southern California (AOU 1983), little is known of its occurrence on the peninsula of Baja California. Black Skimmers were not reported from Baja California until 1979 (Wilbur 1987) but now are observed regularly in winter along the northwestern coast (Wilbur 1987, Escofet et al. 1988). This colonial waterbird has recently established nesting colonies at San Diego Bay, in 1976 (McCaskie 1976, Unitt 1984), and at Bolsa Chica, Orange County, in 1985 (C. T. Collins, pers. comm.), so nesting is likely also in Baja California. In this area, Wilbur's supportive records, mostly for winter, are from only three locations (near Maneadero, Bahía de San Quintín, and Isla San Martín) and of between two and 44 individuals.

At present, we know of 57 additional records of *R. niger* for Baja California, including our observations and those of eight other colleagues, made from 1982 to 1992, at nine locations around the peninsula (Figure 1). These are summarized by location in Appendix 1. At Bahía de San Quintín we, with other observers, counted the numbers of skimmers during coordinated counts of the entire bay by Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO). On most occasions, the Black Skimmers were resting with dozens of gulls, terns, and feeding shorebirds in the main coastal lagoons of Baja California. The observations encompass a total of 4517 individual skimmers.

Ensenada: In this location the birds roost at the mouth of Arroyo Ensenada and 800 m south of it, on the municipal beach. All of the 15 records are for autumn and winter, but the number of skimmers in fall was higher than in winter (Appendix 1), suggesting that this segment of beach is used mainly by birds dispersing after the April–August breeding season. We recorded the numbers of immature skimmers on five occasions: 25 October 1990, 26; 26 October 1990, 18; 28 December 1990, 5; 24 January 1991, 41; 2 February 1991, 5. We also observed banded birds, including adults and immatures, with aluminum and/or color bands: 26 October 1990, 25; 5 November 1990, 13; 28 December 1990, 27; 24 January 1991, 12; 2 February 1991, 4; 11 February 1991, 1; 22 February 1991, 4. These birds were banded at colonies in southern California. Some of them, with color bands, were banded as chicks at the Bolsa Chica colony between 1988 and 1990 (C. T. Collins pers. comm.).

Estero de Punta Banda: This is probably the location mentioned by Wilbur (1987) as "near Maneadero" because it is the typical habitat for skimmers nearest Maneadero. We have made (Palacios et al. 1991, S. González unpubl. data) regular weekly visits to this location since 1988. Fourteen of our 17 records (82%) for this site are for spring or summer; only three are for winter (Appendix 1). Only adults were observed at this location. We also observed banded birds. On the night of 17 April 1990, during a workshop on shorebirds (MBO–CICESE), we netted a skimmer that had been banded as a fledgling at Bolsa Chica on 8 August 1989. On 18 February 1991 we counted 10 banded birds among a flock of 44 individuals. These banded birds could be the same as those seen at Ensenada, dispersing to feed at the estuary and along the shoreline between the two locations.

We noted skimmers feeding at Estero de Punta Banda and Ensenada on 14 occasions, mainly near low tide. Nine observations were of one individual, two were of two individuals, and three were of three individuals. Erwin (1977) also found that skimmers frequently feed singly on their breeding grounds in Virginia.

NOTES

Bahía de San Quintín: We have 10 records for this location (Appendix 1). The numbers substantially exceed those reported by Wilbur (1987). We saw four banded birds in a group of 16 individuals on 19 April 1991. These birds also were banded in southern California (C. T. Collins pers. comm.).

La Pinta Pond: We observed one immature on 10 May 1991.

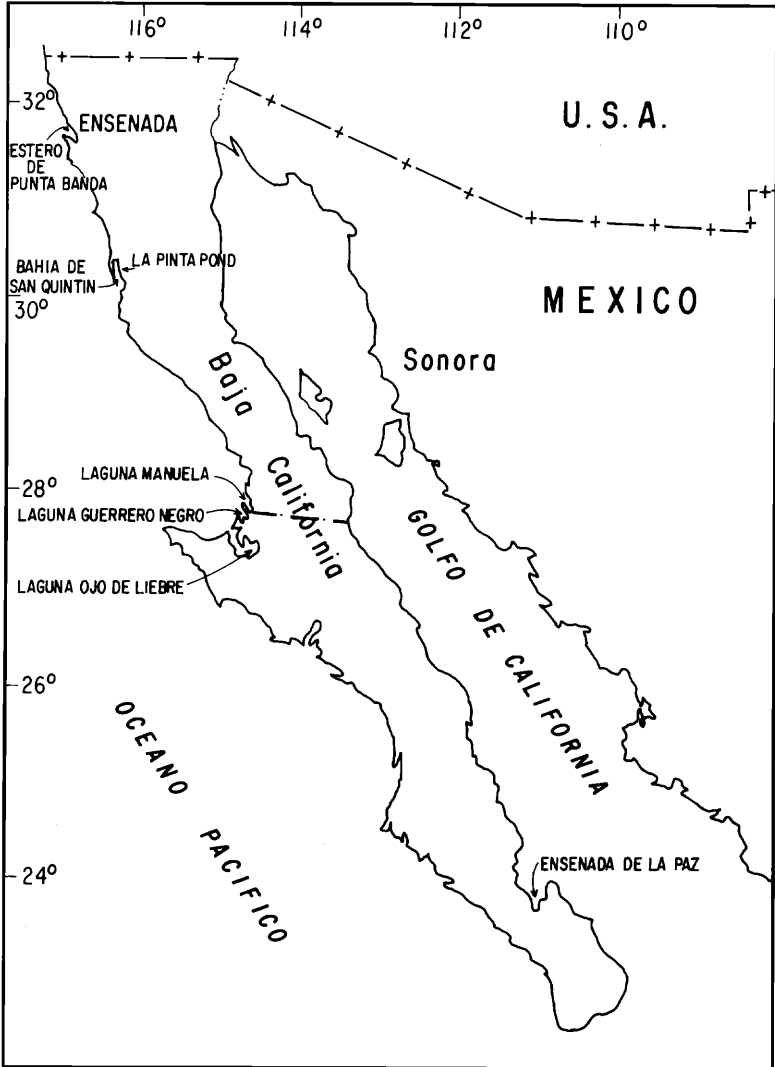


Figure 1. Distribution of Black Skimmers in Baja California.

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Laguna Manuela: We saw 14 adults and three immatures on 14 May 1991, and 12 adults on 20 May 1991, at the northern end of the lagoon.

Laguna Guerrero Negro: F. Heredia (pers. comm.) saw 17 individuals at the mouth of the lagoon on 1 February 1989.

Laguna Ojo de Liebre: J. A. Sánchez (pers. comm.) has seen skimmers here four times (Appendix 1), the southernmost known locality of occurrence on the Pacific coast of Baja California.

There are still no records of Black Skimmers for Laguna San Ignacio (Danemann and Guzmán 1992, D. Ward pers. comm.) or Bahía Magdalena (B. Massey pers. comm.), possibly because of lack of observers.

Ensenada de La Paz: There are only two records, of three on 18 November 1985 (E. Amador pers. comm.) and 12 on 8 January 1988 (R. Webster unpubl. field notes). Amador's record is the first for Baja California Sur. These individuals probably were vagrants from the coast of Sonora or Sinaloa, Mexico, as more skimmers have been sighted offshore in the Sea of Cortez (E. Amador pers. comm.).

After colonizing southern California through Salton Sea (McCaskie et al. 1974), the Black Skimmer is increasing its numbers and extending its distribution in the peninsula of Baja California. The present numbers are higher than previously reported by Wilbur (1987). The Black Skimmer may be considered a locally common bird on the northwestern coast of Baja California not only in winter but year round, and it may be regular in winter in the Vizcaino region (central Baja California). The birds found along the northwestern coast of Baja California, and probably those in the Vizcaino region, come from southern California, as demonstrated by the banded birds observed. The Black Skimmer often breeds in mixed colonies with terns. The occurrence of adult skimmers at Estero de Punta Banda during spring and summer, and the presence of a suitable nesting habitat for the Least Tern on its barrier beach (Palacios et al. 1991), make this coastal lagoon a potential future nesting site for skimmers.

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Appendix 1. Additional records of Black Skimmers in Baja California, 1982-1992. All observations are ours unless another observer is cited.

Ensenada: 14 Feb 1982, 30 (Richard Webster); 17 Mar 1984, 45 (R. Webster); 25 Feb 1989, 90 (Eric Mellink); 7 Apr 1990, 77 (Anamaria Escofet); 25 Oct 1990, 139; 26 Oct 1990, 238; 5 Nov 1990, 170; 8 Nov 1990, 164; 7 Dec 1990, 205; 8 Dec 1990, 220; 19 Dec 1990, 165; 28 Dec 1990, 219; 24 Jan 1991, 135; 2 Feb 1991, 122; 11 Feb 1991, 41; 22 Feb 1991, 12; 3 Mar 1991, 9; 2 Feb 1992, 43.

Estero de Punta Banda: 26 Sep 1987, 1; 22 Jan 1989, 2; 19 Aug 1989, 6; 17 Apr 1990, 1; 21 Apr 1990, 8; 5 May 1990, 50 (Salvador González); 17 Jun 1990, 35 (S. González); 7 Jul 1990, 38 (S. González); 12 Aug 1990, 40 (S. González); 26 Aug 1990, 8 (S. González); 16 Feb 1991, 3; 18 Feb 1991, 44; 21 Apr 1991, 20 (PRBO); 2 Jun 1991, 60; 9 Jun 1991, 26; 14 Jun 1991, 49; 11 Jul 1991, 60.

Bahía de San Quintín: 26 Dec 1983, 70 (R. Webster); 18 Mar 1984, 110 (R. Webster); 29 Jun 1984, 12 (R. Webster); 3 Jul 1987, 40 (R. Webster); 22-23 Apr 1989, 144 (PRBO); 16 Sep 1990, 100 (PRBO); 5-7 Jan 1991, 463 (PRBO); 19-20 Apr 1991, 169; 19-20 Sep 1991, 155 (PRBO); 25-26 Jan 1992, 184 (PRBO); 3-4 Feb 1992, 223 (PRBO).

Laguna Ojo de Liebre (all observations by José Angel Sánchez, Centro de Estudios Tecnológicos del Mar, Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur): Autumn 1983, about 10; winter 1983, about 15; Dec 1990, about 30; 13 Apr 1991, 120.

Along Mexico Highway 5 near Campo Río Hardy (by R. Webster unpubl. field notes): 21 Aug 1984, 25 (3 juv.); 28 Mar 1985, 110.