

**NORTHERN GANNET (*MORUS BASSANUS*) MORTALITY ALONG THE
ALABAMA GULF COAST**

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The Northern Gannet's (*Morus bassanus*) winter range extends well into the Gulf of Mexico. According to Nettleship (1976) wintering birds regularly disperse south along the Atlantic coast to Florida with smaller numbers occurring in the Gulf of Mexico. These birds feed by diving to depths up to 30.5 m (100 ft) (Stokes, 1996). Because their peak food supply of mackerel (*Scomber sp*) and herring (*Clupea sp*) is both seasonal and dependable, egg-laying takes place on a consistently similar date every year. With a large food supply, single chicks have high survival rates (Perrin, 1990). Over the past five years these birds have arrived along the Alabama Gulf Coast as early as September and in greater numbers than previously reported. R. A. Duncan has maintained records for this species in the Pensacola (Florida) area for a number of years, and has observed that these birds have become more numerous (1996). Although listed as being seen well offshore (Gunter 1977), in late November 1996 we observed 100+ birds along the Fort Morgan (Baldwin County), Sand Island, Alabama shoreline. They were a mixed population of adults and immatures. In early March, these birds start their migration back north towards their breeding areas off Gulf of St. Lawrence and the islands of Quebec Bonaventure, Cape St. Mary's Baccalieu and Funk, (Nelson 1978).

In 1996 numerous immature gannets were seen along the Alabama Gulf Coast in late June and early July. By early summer eight Northern gannets were found washed up dead on the shores of Dauphin Island (Mobile County). Gannets were found dead on the following dates in 1996: 16 May, 3 June, 6 June, 12 July, 24 July, 29 July. Examinations of these birds revealed low body weights with deterioration in feathers and the general lack of natural oils. They appeared to be starving. On 30 July, one gannet was recovered barely alive and was taken to the Mobile County Environmental Studies Center for rehabilitation. A month later it was released off of Dauphin Island (Mobile County). The bird gained weight during rehabilitation and was able to fly. The fate of the bird is unknown. It is our belief that these immature stragglers delay their migration because their normal food source, such as herring and bay squid (*Loligo sp.*), are easily obtained during the winter months in the upper water column. During the summer months, the prey and depths they are found in change thereby, possibly causing starvation and death of gannets. Numerous gannets were also reported dead along the Pensacola Beach, Florida, area. Many died in rehabilitation, probably due to starvation. More accurate counts will be made in December and January of 1997. Close attention will be noted of northern migration times and the fate of immatures.

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