



sketch by Steve Abbott

Sabine's Gulls in the Central Valley, Autumn 1998

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On 13 September 1998, I was wandering around Yolo County looking for shorebird habitat. The day was hot and dry and most of the good spots from earlier in the season had dried up. Having little luck early on -- a kettle of 18 Swainson's Hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*) topping the list -- I decided to check the eastern side of the Yolo Bypass. My efforts were rewarded by the discovery of several flooded agricultural fields to the west of, and visible from, the levee on Rd 124.

The light was marginal but workable as I began to scan the flocks of shorebirds. A few Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) were scattered about and a Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) called from the reeds behind me. At 1400 hr, as I began to follow a group of peep with my scope, a small gull with an unmistakable wing pattern flew into my field of view. It was a juvenile Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*).

I watched it hawk over a muddy section of plowed field for approximately 10 seconds after which it disappeared behind tall grass. I then left to alert local birders and returned at 2:40pm. Almost immediately upon my return, a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) appeared, made a few passes at shorebird flocks, and put up the Sabine's Gull. As the Peregrine continued westward, the gull flew south to a large flooded field and lit near a small group of Ring-billed Gulls.

This individual remained until 17 September and was seen by many observers. Sabine's Gulls were reported from two other nearby areas shortly thereafter: 2 juveniles found by Bruce Webb and Pierre Delastre on 19 September over Folsom Lake, Placer, El Dorado and Sacramento counties

(also seen for a few days thereafter by a number of observers); and a juvenile found by Waldo Holt at the Stockton Sewage Ponds, San Joaquin County, on 23 September (W. Holt pers. comm.). Another 3 (or more) juveniles were seen from various locations around north Lake Tahoe, Placer County from 16 September (Todd Easterla pers. comm.) to 3 October (pers. obs.).

These reports appear to have been part of a widespread movement, as an exceptional 72 individuals were reported at inland locations on rare bird alerts from Michigan, south to Texas, and west to the Pacific Coast during the autumn of 1998 (B. Webb pers. comm.). Several of these reports were of multiple individuals, and only 2 birds were identified as adults. Along the Pacific Coast, numbers were up as well, with Shearwater Journeys reporting a high of 914 Sabine's Gulls on Monterey Bay on 15 August (*vide* the Shearwater Journeys web site: <http://www.alink.net/~shearwater/shearwaterjourneys.html>). Though not a record, this number certainly indicated a major flight in nearshore waters.

There are five previous published reports of Sabine's Gulls for Yolo County: a dead bird retrieved at the old Davis sewage ponds, 23 September 1963 (DeBenedictis and Chase 1964); An adult at the modern Davis sewage ponds, 17-20 September 1981 (Evens et al. 1982); an adult at Davis, 12 September 1986 (Bailey et al. 1987); a juvenile at the Woodland sugar ponds, 16 October 1987 (Campbell et al. 1988); and an adult at the Davis sewage ponds, 24-27 September 1991 (Yee et al. 1992). The only previous record for Folsom Lake is of a juvenile there on 30 September 1995 (Gil Ewing pers. comm.).

There are a number of records from municipal sewage pond complexes (Stockton, Tracy and Lodi) in San Joaquin County. A total of at least 4 juveniles and 3 adults were reported in five different years in the 1980s (80, 82, 86, 87 and 89), and single juveniles were reported in four years in the 1990s (93, 96-98; D. Yee pers. comm.). Most of these records are from the Stockton sewage ponds, where large numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) frequently harbor rarer hooded gulls (Evens and LeValley 1981).

Other published records for the Central Valley include single fall records for Butte and Fresno counties (Stallcup and Winter 1976) and Stanislaus County (Campbell et al. 1988). Years in which two or more Sabine's Gulls have been reported from the Central Valley include 1975, 1986, 1987 (3 birds), 1989, and 1998 (4 birds). The multiple records in 1987, like those in 1998, correlated with a strong flight along the coast (Campbell et al. 1988). Although the ratio of adults to juveniles is about 50:50 for the Yolo County records, records of juveniles predominate for the Central Valley as a whole.

... I held my breath, covered my scope, and cringed as another tomato truck, covering everything in its wake under a blanket of fine dust, barreled past me on the dirt road. As bad as it seemed, I couldn't help thinking to myself, 'the last Sabine's Gull that I saw was 25 miles out to sea as I was pulling my head back over the railing. I'll take the occasional 'tomato-truck-dust-bath' over that any day!'

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