

# First record of a Brown Booby in British Columbia, Canada

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**Abstract:** A Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*), observed and photographed on a fishing vessel west of Dundas Island B.C. on 2008 October 20, represents the first confirmed occurrence of this species in the province.

**Key words:** British Columbia, extralimital occurrence, Brown Booby, *Sula leucogaster*

In mid-November 2008, SW contacted me (KM) to say that a fisherman (GK) had reported seeing a probable Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*) in the second half of October. On 2008 December 9, SW forwarded photographs and details of the sighting to me. Confirming that the bird was a Brown Booby, and finding that there were no records of the species for the province, I volunteered to write this note. The following summarizes what occurred.

On 2008 October 20, GK was fishing approximately 32 km west of the southern end of Dundas Island (~ 54.45° N, 131.47° W), towards the eastern end of Dixon Entrance, British Columbia (B.C.). At approximately 16:30 while hauling the net, an 'unusual' bird landed on the stern of the boat close to where the fish were about to be sorted. Because of the location of the bird, the hauling was momentarily stopped and GK's son approached the bird. After picking up the bird, which made no attempt to avoid being handled, the bird was faced into the wind. The booby took flight, circled the boat and then landed again. The bird was picked up again, and this time moved to a spare net drum. Because he was unfamiliar with the species of bird, GK took several photographs of it (Figure 1).

GK noted that at first, the bird seemed quite weak and docile. Over the course of the next few hours, with the boat heading back to port (Prince Rupert, B.C.) the booby was offered several small fish which it readily accepted. The bird remained with the boat for the entire trip back to port; arriving there shortly before 22:00. Over the next five or more hours, as the catch was unloaded and preparations were made for the next trip, more fish were offered to the bird. In contrast to earlier behaviour, GK noted that the booby refused all further offerings of food and it seemed 'somewhat aggressive'. At roughly 02:30 (2008 October 21) the bird flew from the boat and was not seen again.

The first and only other confirmed Canadian record of a Brown Booby occurred on 1941 July 28, in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia (N.S.). Similar to the B.C. bird, the

booby found in N.S. appeared to be quite 'tame' and remained in the same area for several days, before disappearing (Tufts 1986).

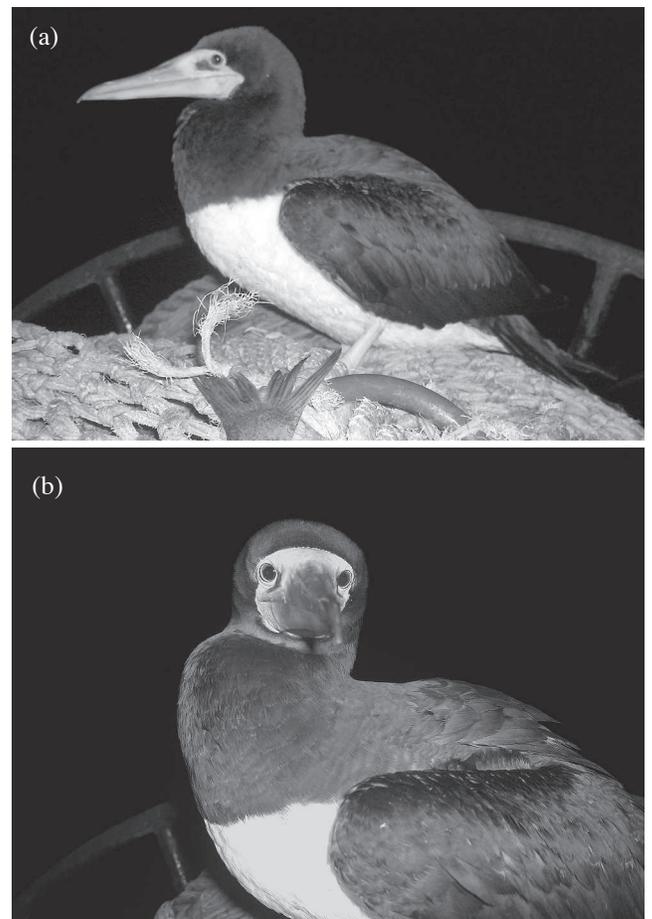


Figure 1. Profile (a) and face-on (b) images of a Brown Booby aboard a fishing vessel west of Dundas Island, B.C. 2008 October 20. Photos by G. Krause.

Schreiber and Norton (2002) report there are four recognized subspecies of Brown Booby:

- *S. l. plotus*, which breeds across central, west and the south Pacific Ocean (including the Hawaiian Island), the Indian Ocean and adjacent seas off northwest and northeast Australia, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden;
- *S. l. brewsteri*, which breeds in the Gulf of California, and off the west coast of Mexico (including Clipperton and the Revillagigedo Islands);
- *S. l. etesiaca*, which nests on islands along the coast from Honduras and Costa Rica to Panama and Columbia; and
- *S. l. leucogaster*, which nests in the tropical Atlantic Ocean from the Bahamas, Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, coasts of Central America east to the Cape Verde Islands.

I contacted several experts, including E.A. Schreiber, in an attempt to determine what subspecies of Brown Booby this bird was. However, because the bird was thought to be a sub-adult female, which makes it difficult to differentiate to subspecies, the bird could not be identified to the subspecies level.

Brown Boobies are almost annual visitors to California; coastal records are scattered throughout the year, with most taking place between August and the end of October (Mlodinow and O'Brien 1996). The species has also been reported on at least four occasions in Oregon; a Brown Booby was seen approximately 28 km off Depoe Bay, central Oregon on 1998 October 3 (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Another bird was observed approximately 32 km west of Winchester Bay (on 2005 July 25), and one on the beach at Seaside (also on 2005 July 25); and, a freshly dead beach-cast bird was found at Lighthouse Beach, Coos County on 2008 October 26 (G. Gillson 2009).

Brown Boobies have been reported from Washington on three occasions: an adult was found at Protection Island on 1997 October 18 and remained there until 1997 November 9; one landed on a boat in Puget Sound and rode it into the port of Tacoma on 2002 May 18; and one was seen off Westport on 2002 October 5 (Wahl *et al.*, 2005).

On 2000 July 13, an adult Brown Booby landed aboard a fish boat in the central Bering Sea. The bird was captured and released, but it subsequently returned to the vessel where it died on 2000 July 15. The specimen was kept and later preserved (University of Alaska Museum specimen #11555, ad male, 750 g, thin - no fat) and was identified as being of the subspecies *plotus*. The bird was considered to have been human-assisted and as such, there are no records of naturally occurring *Sula* in Alaska waters (D. D. Gibson, in litt., 2009 July).

There have been two unconfirmed reports of *Sula* species from BC; a suspected Blue-footed Booby (*S. nebouxii*)

was seen east of Hecate Strait on 1995 July 25, and a possible Masked Booby (*S. dactylatra*) reported from the Parksville area on 2007 May 23, and presumably the same individual, observed near Campbell River on 2007 July 23 (Toochin and Fenneman 2008).

It is unknown how this Brown Booby reached northern B.C., but there are two possible explanations. Hurricane Norbert reached a Category 4 status on 2008 October 8, before diminishing to Category 2 and then back up to 3 just before it made landfall off southern Baja California on 2008 October 11. According to GK, there was a prolonged period of strong winds off the B.C. coast shortly following the hurricane. It is possible that the bird was pushed north- and/or eastward towards the B.C. coast by those winds.

The other plausible explanation is that the bird was ship-assisted. Many birds, especially those that have become lost or disoriented at sea, will readily land on any passing vessel. Over the past 20+ years of conducting pelagic seabird surveys, I have seen a great variety of birds (including cormorants, raptors, waterfowl, shorebirds, alcids, owls, passerines, etc.) land on ships, and remain there for varying lengths of time. Eventually, all of those birds vanished, and it is likely that some of them, upon seeing another ship on the horizon, moved on to the next platform.

It is entirely speculative, but possibly the sustained high winds associated with hurricane Norbert may have initially pushed the bird north and/or eastward. Once it became lost, and presumably hungry and exhausted, it could have hitched rides with an unknown number of ships transiting the North Pacific. However, it will never be known how the Brown Booby reached northern B.C., nor where it went after leaving Prince Rupert. Nevertheless, and regardless of how it got there, by this note we document the first record of Brown Booby in the province.

As a postscript to this note, between the time of submitting the first and second drafts, there were two Brown Booby sightings (presumably of the same individual) off southwestern Vancouver Island. On the afternoon of 2009 August 29, a Brown Booby landed on the mast of a commercial fish boat off Otter Point (~48.36° N, 123.82° W). The bird, which appeared exhausted, remained on the boat for approximately 4 hours until it reached Sooke Harbour (~48.38° N, 123.66° W); at that point, the bird flew away towards the southeast. Later that day, at approximately 19:30, an adult Brown Booby was observed for close to 10 minutes within 300m of Tower Point, Metchosin (~48.38° N, 123.50° W) by two skilled birders (R. Schortinghuis, pers. comm., 2009 September).

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