

# Ornithological Observations



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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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## **BLACK SKIMMER – A FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD FOR SOUTH AFRICA**

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## BLACK SKIMMER – A FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD FOR SOUTH AFRICA

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Bird enthusiasts

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**EDITORIAL NOTE:** This paper is the eyewitness report by two citizen scientists. A minimum of small technical editing was done to prepare the paper for publication. It is trusted that the enthusiasm of the authors can be shared with readers. Ed.

On 04 October 2012 at 14:30, I, Robin Wood (RW), sighted a Skimmer at Rietvlei Nature Reserve in Milnerton, Western Cape. I was out with my mother-in-law, Heather Wood (HW), for an afternoon's viewing of wetland birds – in overcast conditions with light drizzle – intent on finding a few new birds to tick off our list, when a bird with a bright red beak swooped down low across the top of the water, directly behind the pelicans we were training our binoculars on.

The sighting was brief and too quick to make a positive identification, and no more thought was given to it. Half an hour had passed before it re-appeared and started making circular swoops across the top of the water approximately 150 m out from the bird hide we were in.

On closer examination, we realised that this was not a bird we'd seen before. After studying the shape and colour of the beak and legs, coupled with its low circular swoops across the top of the water with its beak open, we realised that we were watching a Skimmer, which

we initially believed to be that of the African Skimmer *Rynchops flavirostris*.

I (RW) reported our sighting to the Rietvlei office and showed them the photographs that I had taken of the bird, and phoned Trevor Hardaker (TH) to let him know too.

The first email regarding our sighting was circulated by TH at 16:19 and notification to the fact that it was in fact a Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*, followed at 18:30, making this the "first confirmed and accepted<sup>1</sup> record of a Black Skimmer anywhere in the world on this side of the Atlantic Ocean" (Trevor Hardaker, pers comm.). Another lifer for us and a world record to boot!

We visited Rietvlei on Friday 05 October 2012 at 09:00 and 17:00 respectively, which had been transformed from a peaceful, quiet reserve to one with a steady stream of foot traffic from local birding enthusiasts and birders from Gauteng – who had specially flown down – hoping to catch sight of the Black Skimmer. It was a stark contrast to the day before but extremely exciting to realise that we were the direct cause, thanks to our feathered friend.

On enquiring at the gate on our way out, we learned that they estimate that 120 people had managed to make it through that day, and a further 50 on 4 October 2012, a total of 170.

Sadly, the Black Skimmer was nowhere to be found on Saturday 06 October 2012, bringing an end to a one and a half day high.

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<sup>1</sup> There were other claims of this species being seen in southern Africa, but these were not documented, confirmed and accepted by a rarities committee or formal birding body- Ed.



### **Acknowledgements**

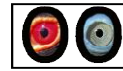
A big thank you to Trevor Hardaker (Chairman of the South African National Rarities Committee) for his quick response to my phone call and for clarifying that the Skimmer sighted was in fact that of a Black Skimmer, and not an African one. Special thanks, also goes to my mother-in-law, Heather Wood, whose enthusiasm and assistance in determining the type of bird I'd spotted, was indeed that of a Skimmer.



**Fig 1-** Black Skimmer at Rietvlei Reserve, Milnerton, Western Cape.



**Fig 2** - Black Skimmer skimming the water at Rietvlei Nature Reserve, Milnerton, Western Cape.



**Fig 3** – Birding enthusiasts twitching the Black Skimmer at Rietvlei Nature Reserve, Milnerton, Western Cape.