FIRST RECORD OF FRANKLIN'S GULL *LEUCOPHAEUS PIPIXCAN* IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

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We report here the first confirmed sighting of Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan* in Saudi Arabia, the third record for the larger Arabian Peninsula. The bird was sighted during an ornithological survey conducted in October 2024. The findings highlight the region's importance as a migratory stopover, emphasizing the need for enhanced research and conservation efforts to protect critical habitats for migratory birds.

Key words: Al Khobar, Arabian Peninsula, habitat conservation, migratory birds, ornithological survey, Saudi Arabia.

Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan* is a medium-sized gull known for its striking plumage, long migratory journeys, and vagrancy. Breeding primarily occurs in the northern plains of North America, with wintering populations primarily occurring in waters along the Pacific coast of South America, specifically Peru and Chile (Howell & Dunn, 2007; Olsen, 2018). Some vagrants and small flocks have been observed widely, from Iceland (Cramp, 1983) to Antarctica (see below; Maftei, 2013). Despite its extensive migratory range, sightings outside the Americas are not common, making this first record in Saudi Arabia a significant addition to its known occurrence patterns.

The National Center for Wildlife of Saudi Arabia conducted an ornithological survey along the Arabian (Persian) Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, from 01 to 10 October 2024. The systematic survey used the Swarovski ATS 80 HD spotting scope and Swarovski EL 10×42 binoculars for accurate species identification. Photographs were taken using a Canon EOS R3 camera, with a Canon USM 300 mm f/2.8 lens, and a Canon 2× III extender. Weather conditions, habitat characteristics, and the presence of other avian species were documented to provide context for the observations. The team employed standard protocols for avian surveys to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection. A map of the results was generated using QGIS software (v10.028, 07 July 2021; QGIS Development Team, 2021).

On 05 October 2024, along the coast of Dammam (Saudi Arabia, coordinates: 26°24′56.81″N, 050°11′8.89″E; Fig. 1), FT observed a small dark-backed gull in the company of a Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* and initially identified it as a Laughing Gull *L. atricilla*. After discussion and showing the photos to DD-L, the identification was changed to Franklin's Gull. Identification was based upon the medium-grey upperparts, dark extensive eye patch forming a hooded appearance, white eyelids, and the thick, angular bill—characteristics that eliminated the Laughing Gull. The ageing was not straightforward, as the bird retained no juvenile feather traits. However, the small amount of white on the tips of the primaries indicated it was in its second winter plumage. The bird had not completed its autumn moult and was still growing its two outermost primaries. Identification and plumage type were further confirmed by accessing the eBird checklist (Campbell & Berhe, 2019). During these observations, the gull was resting on the shoreline together with Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and Slender-billed Gulls. A series of photographs was captured (Fig. 2), and the bird was also observed by Jem Babbington (personal communication, October 5, 2024) roosting offshore towards dusk on the same day.

Franklin's Gull occurrence patterns can be erratic, as their movements do not align with typical transatlantic vagrancy patterns, such as following rapidly moving weather systems across the Atlantic. It is possible that individuals may persist outside the Americas for extended periods. Multiple observations of the species have been recorded for the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and North Africa, starting back in 2003 in Israel and in 2006 in Jordan (Smith, 2004), with further observations in Cyprus (Christodoulides, 2007), Egypt (Dennis et al., 2011), Libya (Bourass et al., 2013), and Ethiopia (Campbell & Berhe, 2020), as well as in Tunisia and Malta (Ebels at al., 2024). The only two previous records of this species in the Arabian Peninsula were documented in Fujairah Port Beach, United Arab Emirates, in May 2011 (Smiles et al., 2013) and in Kuwait in June 2012 (Shobrak & Al-Sirhan, 2022). The Arabian Peninsula, particularly the Arabian Gulf, with its shallow waters and extensive mudflats, serves as a crucial corridor for migratory birds, providing essential stopover sites rich in food resources and suitable resting areas (Evans & Keijl, 1993), with the three records of this species perhaps representative of that.

Fig. 1. The location near the urban area of Dammam, Saudi Arabia, where the Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan* was observed on 05 October 2024 (map produced using QGIS [QGIS Development Team, 2021]).

Fig. 2. The Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan* observed on the shores of Dammam, Saudi Arabia, on 05 October 2024 in association with other species: (A) with a Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*; (B) and (C) with Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*. (D) Reported Franklin's Gull in flight. Photo credits: Fran Trabalon

This observation was part of a series of surveys to identify the important migratory bird areas of the Arabian Gulf. The findings highlight the need for continued monitoring and conservation efforts to protect these vital ecosystems and the avian species that rely on them, with a major focus on enhancing the regional conservation strategies for migratory species.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MAQ and LJR conceptualized the study. FT, FH, RO, and DD-L performed the surveys and identified the bird species. FT took the photos of the bird. LJR and SA wrote the draft manuscript. SA generated the GIS map and produced the figure. MS and AQ contributed to reviewing the manuscript. All authors edited and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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