GoMMAPPS Seabird Monitoring (M17PG00011): an update

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The Gulf of Mexico (GOM) region is considered critically important to North America's migratory bird resources during some point of their annual life-cycle. Unfortunately, limited information is available regarding the species composition, distribution, and abundance of seabirds using the nearshore and offshore waters of the GoM even though the level of oil and gas (O&G) activity in the OCS in this Region (in federal waters alone) exceeds all other BOEM Regions combined. The GoMMAPPS Seabird Science Plan proposed a framework to reduce uncertainty related to seabird abundance and distribution within the GoM relative to O&G activities. Data collected will be valuable to BOEM for informing NEPA analyses, EPs, DOCDs, OSRA models and to USFWS for consultations and planning of O&G activities to reduce or mitigate potential impacts. For the aerial survey component, we completed a pilot effort (July 5-15) to evaluate: (1) survey designs (hexagons v line transects), and (2) sampling protocols to evaluate sampling bias; via USFWS amphibious Kodiak aircraft. Surveys were flown off the LA coast (10 to ~50nm offshore) from LA/TX border to roughly MS/AL line. Overall, bird densities from aerial surveys were low. Data and lessons learned from the pilot surveys will be used to inform future surveys. For the vessel survey component, we completed 4 cruises aboard NOAA vessels. Similar to aerial surveys, data and lessons learned with these surveys will inform planning and logistics for 2018 and 2019 vessel surveys. Overall, both seabird species diversity and total number of seabirds encountered have exceeded expectations.