

Least Tern  
19 May 1984  
Cone Marsh, Louisa Co., IA  
\*C. Bendorf, \*T. Staudt  
IBL 54:46; 55:57

Record Number: 84-16  
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Carl J. Bendorf  
Thomas J. Staudt

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 54:46  
Records Committee: IBL 55:57

VOTE: 6-III, 1-IV

III, Size, rapid flight and deeply forked tail are all somewhat subjective. Dark outer wing primaries, seen only by Staudt, would seem to be best mark. Both observers experienced with this and other possible species.

IV, Could gulls have been Herring? White forehead usually noticeably distinct even from a distance. Seems not beyond reasonable doubt.

III, Size primary identifying feature--done carefully, therefore acceptable.

III, I have noticed that the narrowly dark line formed by the outer primaries in adults is not too hard to see and seems characteristic. I'm glad to see this detail of plumage notes, especially as it is the only one. I like the description of the Least Tern as 'all wing.' That's really what they look like.

REVOTE (at meeting, 8 Sep 1984): 7-III

84-16 (2)

Summary of Review of an Ornithologic Observation<sup>e</sup>

by the Records Committee  
of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union

SPECIES: LEAST TERN

DATE SEEN: May 19, 1984

SITE OF OBSERVATION: Cone Marsh, Louisa County

OBSERVERS: Carl Bendorf, Tom Staudt

DATE OF REVIEW: 1984

METHOD OF REVIEW: Circulation by mail to Records Committee

CLASSIFICATION OF RECORD: III

COMMENTS: Some doubts were raised because of this identification being based largely on size relative to nearby Ring-billed Gulls, it being suggested that maybe the gulls were Herring Gulls (this seems extremely unlikely however, given the date of the observation). It was also noted that size, rapid flight, and deeply forked tail are all subjective. On the other hand it was noted that the dark outer primaries seen by Staudt are diagnostic in this species. After some discussion, it was decided that the objections in this case were only of minor importance.

The opinions expressed here are based on the information available to the Committee and should not necessarily preclude an alternate interpretation by those who observed the bird firsthand.

Any action may be re-reviewed upon submission of additional evidence.

Explanation of Classification:

- I = labeled, diagnostic specimen, photograph, or recording available for review by the Committee
- II = acceptable sight record documented independently by 3 or more observers
- III = acceptable sight record documented by 1 or 2 observers
- IV = probably correct record, but not beyond doubt
- V = record with insufficient evidence to judge
- VI = probably incorrect identification, escapee, or otherwise unacceptable record

Classification is based on the highest category agreed upon by six of seven committee members.

## BIRD DOCUMENTATION FORM

CARL J. BENDORF  
825 7TH AVENUE  
IOWA CITY IA 52240

SPECIES: LEAST TERN NUMBER: 1  
LOCATION: Cone Marsh COUNTY: Louisa  
DATE: 19 May 1984 TIME: 9:30 TO 9:32 AM

HABITAT: State owned marsh of about 700 Acres.

DESCRIPTION: Had seen 2 Ring-billed Gulls fly over. Several minutes later we spotted the gulls again flying with a much smaller bird. They were circling overhead and slowly flew off out of sight. The details noted on the smaller bird were as follows:

Estimated body size and wingspread about 1/4 to 1/3 the size of Ring-billed Gulls. General shape was that of a tern. Had long pointed and swept back wings which were quite narrow even for a tern. Bird was all white except for a black cap. Tail appeared to start just behind the wings, was relatively short for a tern but deeply forked.

The flight of the bird was shallow, irregular and quite fluttery.

SIMILAR SPECIES--COMMENTS: The obvious possibilities are both Common or Forsters' Terns. At the very most, this bird was perhaps half the size of the gulls. This would put the body length in the general range of 8" long with a wingspread of 24" (according to size of Ring bills in the Natl. Geo. Guide) The Natl. Geo. Guide gives the general size range of Least Tern as 9" long with a wingspread of 20 ". The sizes of the other terns are given as Common L 14 1/2', W 30", and Forsters' L 14 1/2, W=31". Thus on size alone, Least Tern seems to be the only reasonable choice. The short but deeply forked tail also indicates Least Tern.

Harrison's SEABIRDS says, on page 182, "Size and hurried flight,...., usually sufficient to clinch identification in northern hemisphere". The flight of this bird was much quicker and fluttery compared to my experience with the slower, deeper, and more deliberate flight of Common and Forster's Terns.

AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT OF OTHERS: Tom Staudt agreed. While we did not see the easy mark of the white on the forehead, we felt there was no reasonable alternative because of the size, flight pattern, and tail structure.

LIGHT CONDITIONS: General overcast, sun position not a factor, but light was fair.

DISTANCE: 150 yards (Estimated) EQUIPMENT: 7X binos

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND SIMILAR SPECIES: Familiar with both Common and Forster's, have seen a number of Least in Florida in 1983

REFERENCES, PERSONS CONSULTED BEFORE WRITING DESCRIPTION: none--field notes made independently in 15 minutes, this form typed next day.

## DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

What species? Least Tern How many? 1Location? Cook Marsh Louisa Co. IowaType of habitat? Shallow lake with marshy edgesWhen? date(s): MAY 19, 1984 time: 9:30 am to Who? your name and address: THOMAS J. STAERTOthers with you: Carl BendorfOthers before or after you: 

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior. seen in flight only.

Small bird estimated to be around  $\frac{1}{4}$  size of the Ring-billed gulls it was flying with. The bird appeared to be mostly wings.

The wings were quite narrow and sharply pointed. Head and rump/tail didn't extend noticeably out from the wings. Tail was short and strongly forked and appeared to start at the back of the wings. The bird was white (underparts more clearly seen) with the exception of a narrow black cap and narrow dark outer wing primaries.

Flight was more erratic than other terns, fluttery rapid wingbeats, not deep or stiff strokes.

## Similar species and how eliminated:

Black tern in any plumage does not have a forked tail, more contrast upper to underparts. Forster's and common terns have longer tails, more controlled wingbeats, and larger size.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

gray, completely overcast, 7X binoculars

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

many sightings of Least Tern in Florida over a 10 day period April to May 1983

References and persons consulted before writing description:

National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America was referred to after notes were made.

How long before field notes made? 30 minutes this form completed? same day