

Roseate Tern
3 May 1980
Muscatine, Muscatine Co., IA
*T. Shires
IBL 52:42

Record Number: 80-12
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

[T. K. Shires]

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 52:42

VOTE: 2-Yes, 3-No, 2-abstain

abstain, disqualified, I was there.

No, Reluctantly--the notes are good but the shortness of observation, easy confusion between similar species and remoteness of seeing this bird in Iowa all affect my opinion. The bird prob. is endangered in the U.S. with only a handful of colonies left. I would need a photo, specimen, or more leisurely study by several observers before I could confidently add it to Iowa list.

No, Lacks independent confirmation.

No, Rarity of species and brief obs. at long range, single observer.

Yes, Excellent detail. It is assumed none of the other three obs. have any reason to strongly feel it was another species.

Yes, Features seen appear to strongly suggest this species. Specimens exist for interior U.S. -- Indiana. Bill color is important -- only black for a short time, but May 3 is opportune time.

Submitted by T.K. Shires

80-12 20 Sep 1980
see note

- 1. Species Roseate Tern
- 2. Number one
- 3. Location Mississippi River at Muscatine Iowa
- 4. Date: May 3, 1980
- 5. Time Bird Seen: circa 1000 hrs to 1015 hrs

6. Description of size, shape and color-pattern (describe in great detail all parts of the plumage, and beak and feet coloration, in addition, to the diagnostic characteristics, but include only what actually was seen in the field):

- 1. Typical general features of adult Spring Middlewestern Sterna: full black "cap", pointed slender wings, pointed slender bill, long forked tail, white breast and throat, gray "mantle".
- 2. Features most apparent in comparison with nearby Common and Forster's terns: Much longer tail, lighter overall mantle, more or less uniform light gray over back and superior wing surfaces.
- 3. Features of the bird per se: bill entirely black, tail fork extended nearly to the base of the tail, tail length was approximately equal to half the overall length of the bird in air.

The bird was never seen sitting - so relative lengths of wing and tail could not be determined. See attached for more details.

- 7. Description of voice, if heard: Not heard
- 8. Description of behavior: hunting waters of the Mississippi River in typical Sterna fashion
- 9. Habitat - general: Mississippi River
specific: Waters below Lock and Dam at Muscatine

10. Similarly appearing species which are eliminated by questions 6, 7 & 8. Explain:

- 11. Distance (how measured)?
initially seen at distances up to 0.5 miles, later seen at 150-200 yards
- 12. Optical equipment:
Questar, 20X scopes, and 10x50 binoculars
- 13. Light (sky, light on bird, position of sun in relation to bird and you):
essentially cloudless at about 1000 hrs, sun was to the South and at our backs

14. Previous experience with this species and similarly appearing species:
See attached for details

- 15. Other observers:
Karl Bendorf, Tom Staudt, Tom Kent, and Tom Shires (Bendorf, Staudt and Kent did not see all described features and do not participate in the identification) - See attached
- 16. Did the others agree with your identification?
Yes - See attached.

17. Other observers who independently identified this bird:
To my knowledge, the bird was not seen again

18. Books, illustrations and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description?
See Attached account.

19. How long after observing this bird did you first write this description?
The description was written the evening of May 3.

Signature: _____ Address: _____

Date: _____ City, State: _____

At 10 AM on May 3, 1980, 4 of us (Karl Bendorf, Tom Kent, Tom Staudt and myself) were at the North end of Muscatine Waterfront Park happily viewing what for Iowa birders was an unusually large number of Common terns. Perhaps a dozen of these terns were hunting the Mississippi to our North under and beyond the highway bridge and below the Muscatine Lock and Dam. Much further North, out of effective scope range, there were additional bands of terns sitting on sandy edges of the shore. The River is quite wide at this point and the free-wheeling terns were widely spread except for one spot on the Illinois side North of the Bridge where half a dozen Common terns were congregated. The only Forster's tern of the day, the normally frequent Iowa Sterna, was in this fishing group. With the sun to our backs in a near cloudless sky, viewing conditions were excellent with 20x scopes, Questar, and 10X binoculars for this group, terns even at their distance of up to half a mile. While studying this group, Tom Kent, the most reliably hawk-eyed Professor of our 4, pointed out a tern in the group with a markedly longer tail. Like the accompanying Common and Forster's terns, this bird had a full Sterna "cap", gray mantle and crisp white underparts. Unlike them, its tail was proportionately longer and, to my eye, a much paler mantle than the other terns. Its comparative whiteness was such that the bird could be visually picked out of the group on that characteristic alone. Given the position and distance of the bird, however, there seemed no hope we could move to a new viewing position and therefore abandoned effort to establish the bird's identity driving off toward Wildcat den through the city of Muscatine and North on highway 22.

Heading North out of Muscatine, highway 22 approaches and then runs along the West bank of the Mississippi River, separated from the bank only by a double railroad track. As we approached the River that day, Bendorf, in the right front seat of the car, spotted our long-tailed tern flying North just off the West bank though the thin and for the season still poorly leaved trees along the bank. Traffic on the road that day was heavy and fast in both directions and Kent, the driver, had to struggle for a turnoff. As the car slowed to a precarious and tentative halt on the side of the road, two things happened: those on the left side of the car were diverted by the sighting of 2 broad-winged hawks soaring over the hill to the West, and I hopped out of the left rear (probably at some risk) and got my glasses on the tern as he came by a break in the trees and paused to hover in the tail-down, head-down position characteristic of terns. Two new pieces of information were obtained: the bill was black throughout its length, both upper and lower mandibles, and the tail was deeply forked (to about 3/4ths of its length). Unfortunately by the time the others were able to stumble out of the car, the tern had turned across river and flew out of sight.

The circumstances of the sighting of this tern are such that it must be considered a one-observer record - only I saw all the characteristics of the bird, and as will be discussed below all the characteristics are important.

Tail: Under the best observation conditions, the long tail length of S. dougalli is best estimated by its relationship to the length of the folded wing in a sitting bird. This bird was never seen sitting and length was estimated by comparison with the tail lengths of Common and Forster's terns. R.C. Murphy in Oceanic Birds of the World, Vol II, points out that although dougalli tail-length is as great as that of any Sterna there is overlap with tail lengths of some arctic terns. The occurrence on this bird of a deeply cleft tail, pallid mantle, and a monotone black bill do not support it as an Arctic tern.

Bill: In my experience with Roseate terns, red occurs at the base the bill and extends down the bill to perhaps 1/4th its length. The bill of the Mississippi River bird was puzzling until I came across Grace Donaldson's publication in AUK (1978, 85:662-668) describing a breeding seasonal change in size of this red base. Spring birds prior to breeding lack the red base altogether and have completely black bills. The Artic tern bill can also appear all dark depending on viewing conditions and the variable extent of "blood" red tip. The Mississippi River bird was viewed under ideal light conditions and its bill seen at 150-200 yards with 10x binoculars without displaying any indication of "two-toning".

The occurrence of a Roseate tern on the Mississippi River at Muscatine Iowa:

The Roseate tern is primarily a bird of the Eastern Seaboard although some Wintering birds may occur on the Gulf coast as far West as Texas. Association of Roseate with Common terns occurs on East coast breeding grounds where breeding colonies of the 2 species may be contiguous. Hybridization between the 2 species has been described as well as accidental egg exchange and the resulting allopatric imprinting of chicks (viz. H.Hayes, AUK, 1975, 92: 219-234). A feature of the Mississippi River bird is its co-occurrence with an unusual number of Common Terns.

Tern identification requires field experience. I would share the diffidence of my colleagues in identifying this Mississippi River bird were it not for the 12 birding years of my life I spent growing up near the Connecticut shore where the Roseate, Common, and Artic terns are regular and even common in season. One Summer I helped E. Alexander Bergstrom band a colony of Roseates. In talking with Iowa Ornithologists having extensive Eastern birding experience (Mike Newlon and Ross Silcock) as well as Easterners (Darrel Peterson, Marjorie Zucker), I find them unhesitatingly accepting of the identity of the Mississippi River bird.

Roseate Tern	3 May 1980	Muscatine	Shires	2/3/2
short period of observation, needs confirmation, very unlikely,				
brief observation by single observer at long range.				