

Arctic Tern
18 Aug 1999
Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co., IA
*S. Dinsmore, *J. Dinsmore, *A. Johnson
IBL 70:38, 145, Dinsmore 1999; P-0626

Record Number: 99-19
Classification: A-P

DOCUMENTATIONS

Stephen J. Dinsmore, 612 1/2 West Magnolia St., Fort Collins,
CO 80521.

Jim Dinsmore, 4024 Arkansas Dr, Ames 50014

Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211

PHOTOGRAPHS

Stephen J. Dinsmore, P-0626, IBL 69:134

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 70:38

Records Committee: IBL 70:145

Dinsmore, S.J. 1999. Arctic Terns at Saylorville Reservoir: A
first for Iowa. Iowa Bird Life 69:133-135.

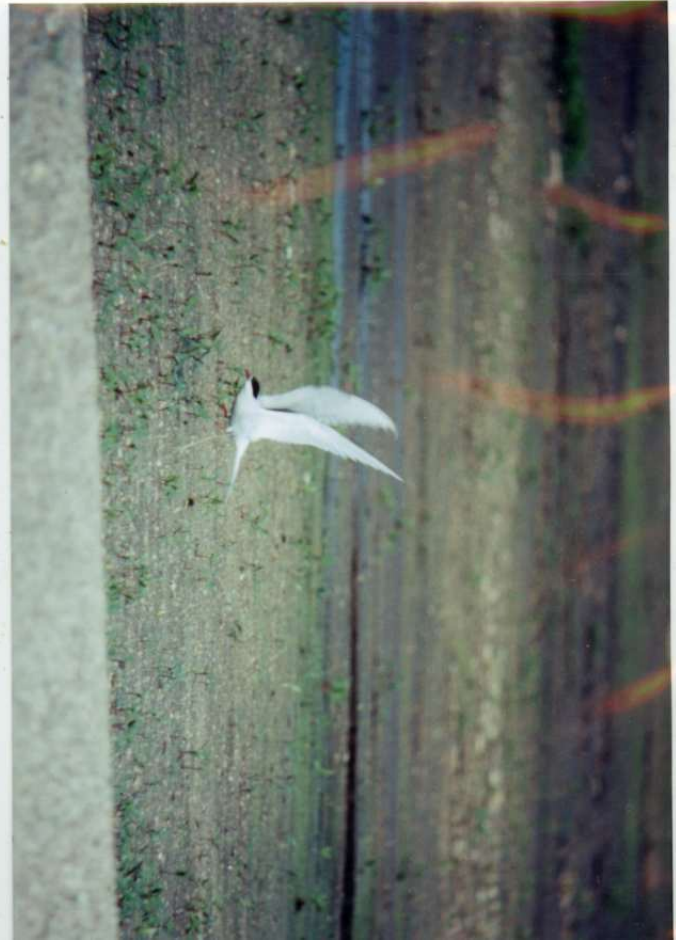
VOTE: 7 A-P

A-P, A remarkable, well-described first state record.

A-P, Great photos showing many fieldmarks.

A-P, The features that I can see in the photos include short
legs and short bill, round head, short neck, dark tips to
primaries, grayer underparts, grayer upper wing compared to
Forster's, dark cap, and red bill and legs. The dark leading edge
to the outer wing is at best barely evident in the photos. The
contrasting white cheek is subtle.

A-P, Excellent shot of extended wings leaves no doubt.



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DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species: Arctic Tern
Number: 1 adult
Location: Saylorville Reservoir, Polk County, Iowa
Habitat: large reservoir
Date: 18 August 1999
Time: 5:30-5:55 p.m.
Observer: Stephen J. Dinsmore 612 1/2 West Magnolia St. Fort Collins, CO 80521
Others who saw bird(s): James J. Dinsmore

Description of bird(s): We arrived at the Sandpiper Beach area at about 5:15 p.m. and noted a small flock of gulls and Forster's Terns resting on the beach. Seeing nothing unusual, we were about to leave when I spotted two *sterna* terns flying towards the beach. I had a brief look at them in flight before they landed. One bird was clearly a Forster's Tern because of the white crown and black goggle around each eye. The second bird was smaller and had a dark cap, gray upperwings, and much darker gray underparts. I was convinced the bird was not a Forster's Tern, and my brief look at the upperwings didn't seem to match Common Tern either. When perched, the birds' smaller size, dark gray underparts, and white cheek stood out among the Forster's Terns. At this time, I was convinced the bird was an Arctic Tern.

After a few minutes, we were able to walk down to the beach and approach to within 25m of the terns. From this distance, we easily confirmed our identification as an adult Arctic Tern. I estimated the bird was 10-15% smaller than a Forster's Tern. The bill was a deep red color, much darker than the orange bill of a Forster's Tern. The bill was very short; I estimated it was roughly 75% of the length of the head and noticeably shorter than the bill of a Forster's Tern. The cap was black with a small area of white at the base of the upper mandible. The underparts, including the throat, breast, and belly, were dark gray. The cheek was white and contrasted with the black cap and dark gray underparts. The legs were a deep red color and were approximately half the length of the legs of a Forster's Tern. I also noted that the legs were much thinner than those of a Forster's Tern. When perched, the mantle and upperwings appeared darker gray than those of a Forster's Tern. Also, the outer web of the outer primary appeared black. I studied the wing pattern in detail during several short flights. The upperwing was uniformly dark gray with no black visible in the outer primaries. The underwing was white with black tips to the outer primaries and black along the entire edge of the outermost primary. The tail was white and forked. When perched, the outer rectrices barely extended beyond the wingtips.

We aged the bird as an adult that was just beginning the molt to basic plumage. Research after the sighting revealed that a complete molt to basic plumage in Arctic Terns does not take place until they reach the wintering grounds (Olsen and Larsson 1995). Common Terns appear to have an earlier molt cycle and would be expected to have considerably more white on the forehead at this time. Therefore, a *Sterna* in nearly full alternate plumage at this date further supports the identification.

Similar species and how eliminated: The combination of size, bill shape and color, white cheek, dark gray underparts, leg length, and wing pattern eliminate other species of *Sterna*.

Previous experience with species: I have seen numerous Arctic Terns at sea in the Atlantic, mostly off North Carolina. I have also seen 2-3 in each of the last two years at a nesting site in Montana.

Viewing conditions and equipment: Viewing conditions were excellent with mostly clear skies and the sun behind us. Estimated viewing distance was initially 200m and later as close as 15-20m. I used 10x42 binoculars and a 20-60x spotting scope.

References consulted: NGS (1999) Field Guide to the Birds of North America
Olsen and Larsson (1995) Terns of Europe and North America
Kaufman (1990) Advanced Birding

How long before field notes written? written immediately after observation
How long before this form completed? written 18 August 1999

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species Arctic Tern How many? one
 Location? Sandpiper Beach at Saylorville Reservoir
 Type of habitat? sandy beach along lake
 When? date(s): 18 August 1999 Time: 5:30-5:55 p.m.
 Who? Jim Dinsmore
 Others with you Stephen Dinsmore
 Others before or after you

Describe the bird(s) The bird was first seen in flight and then was viewed perched alongside several Forster's and Black Terns. It was seen in flight three times, twice quite well. It was compared directly with Forster's Terns perched near it several times. The bird, a black-capped tern, was in alternate plumage with just the first hints of molt as evidenced by some white feathers at the base of and above the bill. In size it appeared to be about 10-15% smaller than the nearby Forster's Terns. Several features of its body proportions helped identify it. Most noticeably, its legs were clearly much shorter than those of the nearby Forster's, perhaps about 50-60% of their length. The Arctic Tern's legs were also much thinner and appeared more dainty than those of the Forster's. The bird's tail streamers were long and extended beyond the folded wing. Also the bill appeared to be somewhat shorter than that of the Forster's Tern. Both the legs and the bill were a dark, blood-red in color as compared to the orange-red of the Forster's. Overall, the Arctic Tern appeared darker, dustier in color than the Forster's Terns. The cap of the head was black which extended down to and included the eye. The underparts and breast were a dusky gray in color and contrasted distinctly from an area of white that included the cheeks, under the bill and down to the uppermost areas of the throat. The back was somewhat dusty in color and appeared somewhat darker than the back of the nearby Forster's Terns. In flight, overall, the bird also appeared darker than the Forster's Terns. In flight, the wings were carefully viewed. As it passed overhead, I could see that the undersides were all white except for a narrow line (or bar) of black near the tips of the primaries. The upper sides of the wings were darker colored than the undersides but there was no evidence of black on the wing tips or elsewhere on the wings.

Similar species and how eliminated: The short legs and overall dusky appearance strongly suggests an Arctic Tern over the other three possible dark-capped terns, Forster's, Common, and Roseate. The direct comparison with Forster's and the above-mentioned differences in leg length, body size, and coloration all should eliminate Forster's. Both the Common and Roseate tern have distinct black wing-tips on the upper wing, a feature lacking in this bird. Also the dusky coloration should eliminate the highly unlikely Roseate Tern. The very narrow black bar on the underside of the primaries eliminates Common Tern which has much more black there and it extends to the front of the wing.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: clear sky, good light, viewed with 20 plus scope as close as ca 50 yards from bird.

Previous experience I have seen Arctic Terns in Massachusetts, Maine, and Montana. In particular, the Massachusetts sighting emphasized the short-legged, smaller bodied, dusky coloration that were evident on this bird.

References & persons consulted before writing description: National Geographic field guide and Advanced Birding (Kaufman) used to some extent while writing this up but field marks were all noted carefully while viewing the bird.

How long before field notes made? Notes taken in field jsut after viewing bird. This form filled out about 14 hours later.

99-19

**DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

Species: Arctic Tern

Location: Sandpiper Beach, Saylorville Reservoir, Polk County, IA

Habitat: Lake edge

Date: 20 August 1999 **Time:** 12:40 - 12:50 **Length of observation:** approx. 10 minutes

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

Other Observers: presumably same bird seen by Jim and Steve Dinsmore two days prior

Background: This was my first opportunity to go looking for either of the Arctic Terns that had been reported in the past couple of days. It was a lucky long-shot attempt over my lunch hour.

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): Initial light was certainly not optimum as I was facing south at midday with a bright sun. The birds were not particularly difficult to see but shades of gray on terns and gulls were suspect. I was at the far south corner of the parking lot at Sandpiper looking at the water's edge, approximately 150 yards distant. Optics were 7X42 binoculars and scope at approximately 45X.

Description of bird: There was a line of birds along the shoreline which included numerous Ring-billed Gulls and two Avocets. Beside the Avocets sat two sternas, one much shorter legged than the other - first clue this was probably the Arctic Tern. All the birds were facing away from me but the shorter one appeared slightly darker than the other. The taller, paler bird turned its head and the dark eye patch identified it as a Forster's Tern. The shorter bird finally turned its head and it had a full black cap and nape, indicative of an adult bird. This bird finally took off cruising and diving in the beach area and further out on the lake. Lighting was much better at this angle and I could see that the bill was dark red, at times looking black. The underparts were dusky enough to make the white cheek stand out, although this mark was not the stark contrast I have seen on spring birds. The upperparts were pretty much uniformly gray with white tips to the secondaries. Although the upperwing was pretty much uniform in color, it did not appear to be as pale as a Forster's. The underwings were white with a black trailing edge to the primaries.

Similar species/discussion: One of the defining characteristics of an Arctic Tern is its short legs. It was neat to see this feature illustrated as it stood beside a Forster's as this is something I have never been able to observe before. The black cap and nape indicate an adult bird. Although all the Forster's I saw at this time had lost their cap, a late molting bird can be eliminated by the darker mantle and the darker feathers of the underwing being restricted to the trailing edge of the primaries. Other sternas show darker markings on the upperwing.

Previous experience: Have documented the first Arctic Tern in New York Harbor and have seen this species in the northeast and in Canada.

References consulted: NGS guide