

CFO-ORC FILE # 1997-45ACCEPTED 6-1

COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

NEW STATE RECORD UNUSUAL RECORD Xrec'd 10-14-97**Species:** Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)**Date:** 31 May 1997**Number seen:** one**Sex:** unknown**Plumage:** Definitive Alternate**Locality:** Colorado River State Park**Elevation:** 4500'**Nearest town:** Grand Junction**County:** Mesa**Time observed:** late afternoon**Duration of observation:** about 5 minutes

Description: I was riding with Jamie Cameron and John Toolen (following Rich Levad) while on a Western Screech-Owl-banding expedition, when we decided to visit the Connected Lakes Unit of the Colorado River State Park to see what in the way of waterbirds we might find. While driving on the access road to the park, Jamie noticed a tern flying over the Colorado River. We stopped to look at the bird and I noticed that the bird was flying very bouyantly, was very pale, and had a very long tail. The three of us watched for about a minute while it flew around over the river until it headed to the pond that was just ahead of us. I said that we ought to get a better look at the bird, privately thinking that this might be a really good bird, but doubting that inner voice.

Rich Levad was already in the parking, so, as we raced for the shore of the pond, I yelled at Rich to come look at this tern. We quickly refound the bird on the far side of the pond (unfortunately, noone had a scope). We watched the bird for a few more minutes as it flew around the pond, mostly at some distance against a gray sky. I finally thought to myself (though I could feel Jamie thinking the same thing) that this bird is an Arctic and I better get photos. So, I ran back to the car to get my camera, but as soon as I got it out of the car and turned around, I saw all the others walking toward me; the bird had flown back toward the river. We looked up and down the river for quite a while, checked the pond again, but could not refind the bird.

We quickly discussed what we had seen, with Jamie and I mentioning the same field marks and Rich mentioning something he had seen that Jamie and I hadn't. I wrote notes later that evening from memory of what I had seen and what we had discussed.

The tern was a medium-sized *Sterna* tern (long, narrow wings; long, forked tail; reddish bill, black cap, and pale gray mantle) that had a very bouyant flight and fairly dark underparts (at least for a *Sterna*). Though there were no other terns available for comparison, the bill appeared to be very much shorter than that expected for Forster's Tern and it was entirely dark red (no black tip). The black cap was set off very sharply by a wide, white streak stretching from the bill through the cheek to the shoulder. This white was strongly demarcated by the black of the crown and by the medium gray that extended from the throat the length of the underparts.

The mantle (both back and wings) was the same smooth, pale gray though there was black along the trailing edge of the primaries. I had trouble discerning the exact wingtip pattern, but the outer primaries were definitely mostly pale and there was no intrusion of dark in the middle of the primaries. The tail

appeared to be very long, as in Forster's Tern; longer than that shown by Common Tern. I could not discern any color on the tail other than white; I think I would have been able to see dark outer webs to the outer rectrices had they been dark. The underwings were bright white (what I could see of them) and contrasted with the color of the underparts. I could not discern the exact wingtip pattern nor could I discern "translucent" secondaries, as I couldn't see the underwing all that well and the sky was rather dark.

What is your prior experience with this and similarly-appearing species? I have seen about 30 Arctic Terns and bazillions each of Common and Forsters terns.

Light conditions: sun in front of us, but mostly covered by rather thick clouds

Optical equipment used: 7x42 Zeiss

Distance, and how estimated: estimated distance of 100 - 500 feet

Other observers who saw the bird with you: Jamie Cameron, Rich Levad, John Toolen

Other observers who saw the bird independently: none

If photographed, type of equipment and film: I did not photograph.

List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc. consulted and how this influenced your identification:

a) **at time of observation:** Nat. Geo. - no influence, though it confirmed the marks we saw as important in identifying the species

b) **after observation:** none

Reporting observer: Tony Leukering

Signature: 

Address: Colorado Bird Observatory, 13401 Piccadilly Road, Brighton, CO 80601

Date report was written: 10 June 1997 (mostly; finished on 2 & 9 October 1997) from notes written a short time after the sighting

Note: Jamie Cameron independently identified this bird as an Arctic Tern, a species he has seen previously.

Colorado Field Ornithologists--Sight Record Form

Species: Artic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

Birds sighted: 1 adult

Time: May 31, 1997, approximately 5:30 p.m.

Location: Connected Lakes unit of Colorado River State Park west of Grand Junction.

Status: A&R report it as accidental late spring migrant (one record) on the eastern plains. No western slope records.

Setting: I was birding at Connected Lakes with Tony Leukering, Jamie Cameron, and Sue Bonfield, when Jamie and Tony called my attention to a tern that was flying down the river. It circled around the lake a couple of times and then headed out of sight to the west. The bird was in my sight for only a minute or two.

Behavior: The bird occasionally would catch a flying insect by folding its wings and dropping on it from above, not unlike the tern technique of fishing. I have never before noticed a tern flycatching in this manner.

Description: The bird was a fork-tailed, small-billed, black-capped tern. Its underparts were gray, nearly as dark as the mantle. A sharply-delineated, narrow, jet black line marked the trailing edge of the primaries. The mantle and the top of the wing appeared to be uniformly gray with no lighter or darker coloring on the primaries.

Vocalizations: I heard none.

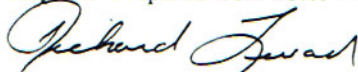
Habitat: The bird was flying down the Colorado River and paused briefly to circle Connected Lakes.

Similar Species: Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) is very much whiter beneath and generally shows a flash of white on the primaries contrasting with the inner wing and mantle. Although Forster's Tern may show some black at the tips of the primaries, it is not sharply delineated and is generally charcoal rather than jet. Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*), is much lighter beneath, (except for Asian subspecies), and generally shows a black wedge in the primaries. The black line on the trailing edge of the Common Tern's wing has never appeared to me as fine, as jet black, nor as sharply delineated as the line on this bird.

Experience: No previous observations of Arctic Tern. Forster's Tern is a regular migrant through western Colorado and I have seen hundreds of them. Common Tern is a rare (but perhaps increasing) migrant through western Colorado where I have seen about a dozen. I have also seen this bird in northern Minnesota.

Books consulted: National Geographic, Peterson Western, and Audubon Masters field guides.

Report: Prepared from notes written shortly after observation.



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