

# FIELD NOTES

2000-168

rec'd 10/13/00  
ACCEPTED

**Species reported:** Arctic Tern – late juvenile plumage

**Number of individuals:** One bird that roosted along the water's edge with several hundred Franklin's Gulls and four Common Terns (3 juv & 1 adult basic). The bird would often stand right next to one of the Common Terns, which allowed for direct comparison between the species.

**Location:** Union Reservoir, Weld County

**Date of sighting:** October 6-7, 2000 - These field notes and the accompanying video are from Oct 7.

**Time:** October 7- 7:45 AM – 9:30 AM.

**Reporting observer:** John W. Vanderpoel 7583 Estate Circle  
Niwot, CO 80503

**Other observers:** Joe Roller, Maggie Boswell, Bill, Inez & John Prather. & others.  
David Leatherman came later.

**Light and weather conditions:** On October 6 conditions were rather dark and dreary. October 7 had high cloud cover and visibility was excellent with no direct sunlight. Cold with temperature in the 40's.

**Optical Equipment:** Zeiss 10 X 40B, Kowa Telescope, JVC Video camera

**Distance to bird:** Approximately 75 yards

## Description:

**size** – a medium size tern, perhaps slightly smaller than the juvenile Common Terns

**leg** – The bird was slightly shorter legged than the three juv Common Terns. This was difficult to judge, because sometimes there was debris or uneven sand, but at least twice I could clearly see the shorter leg length.

**head** – white forehead, black crown that extended down to eye, with a “football helmet effect” (see drawing) behind the eye. This by the way is apparently indicative of this species. (see Vinicombe)



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**bill -** 3 of the Common Terns had bills that were considerably longer and thicker than Artic. The fourth Common Tern's bill was more delicate than the others. There is sexual dimorphism in bill length among the terns so I assume that the shorter, thinner billed individual was a female Common tern. When compared directly against this individual, the Artic Tern's bill was still very slightly shorter. The outer 2/3's of the bill was black diffusing to a dark red at the base.

**chest and belly** – white, no gray shading

**wing shape** - I really could not notice any difference in wing shape or wing beat between the Artic and Common Terns.

**upperwing** –The carpal bar was less pronounced than any of the three juv Common Terns; very similar to the adult basic Common Tern. The secondaries were white with no dark secondary bar. This was very apparent in flight (see video). The edge of the greater secondary coverts were also white, while the outer primaries were pale gray and this had the effect of a faint inverted w pattern (as you would see in a Red-legged Kittiwake). I have frozen the video to highlight this pattern and also scanned in the drawing by Tucker.

**underwing** – The underwing was white except for a thin black trailing edge on the outer primaries. I was never able to compare the thickness of this black trailing edge with any of the Common Terns.

**tail** - The white rump was visible in flight and contrasted with the gray mantle. On at least one of the juvenile Common Terns I could view the pale gray rump and it didn't contrast with the gray mantle. The tail was whitish except for the outer retrices which were gray.

**mantle & folded primaries** – The mantle was gray, identical to the Common Terns. There really wasn't any brown on the bird at all. The coverts did have dark edging rather than white, which helped identify the bird as a juvenile. The folded primaries were paler gray than those of the juvenile Common Terns. This gray was very similar in shading to the gray in the folded primaries of the lone adult basic Common Tern.

**Voice:** N/A

**Previous Experience with species:** I have seen hundreds of adult Arctic Terns in alternate plumage and have a pretty good feeling with shape and structure. I've never seen this age/plumage before.

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## Identification Aids: (list of books, illustrations, video or other birders consulted in identification)

- The MacMillan Field Guide to Bird Identification -Vinicombe & Tucker
- Advanced Birding – Ken Kaufmann
- The National Geographic

**Conclusion:** The described bird is a late juvenile Arctic Tern. The combination of shorter legs and thinner bill are suggestive of an Arctic Tern rather than a Common Tern. The less pronounced carpal bar of this juvenile Arctic Tern helps rule out a juvenile Common Tern (though not an adult basic Common Tern).

While in flight the white rump, contrasting with the gray mantle **and** the white trailing edge of the secondaries both rule out juvenile Common Tern which has a gray rump and a darker secondary bar that contrasts with the paler gray secondary coverts. The black helmet and the carpal bar rule out a Forster's Tern in late juvenile plumage.