

2003-112

ACCEPTED

Report for Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) observation.

Date: 11/30/2003

Location: Pueblo Reservoir (Fisherman's Point), Pueblo County

Time of Observation: 0900-0930

Observers: Nick Komar, John W. Prather

Optical Equipment: Kowa 15x-60x Zoom Telescope; Viewed in flight with Leica 10x42 binoculars (Prather), Nikon 7x35 Action binoculars (Komar).

Distance to bird: 100 m – 1000 m, varied during the observation

Other observers: Reported originally Tuesday November 26 by Brandon Percival, seen Nov. 27 by Dave Elwonger, and Nov. 28 by Roger Linfield.

Viewing conditions: Bird was observed under overcast sky with solar glare in the southeast quadrant of the horizon. We faced south to observe the bird from a position approximately 50 feet above the surface of the water.

#### Description:

We observed a *Sterna* tern sitting on flotsam at a distance of about 200 m with mostly black cap, pale gray mantle, whitish underparts, red tern-like bill, red legs, and long wings with darker primaries over a long white tail. The size was less stocky, appearing smaller, than nearby Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*).

The head was rounded, capped with deep black from the upper forecrown to the nape, extending down from the crown to the eyeline. The lower forecrown was mottled white and black, and the nape had a few white feathers. The malar and auricular regions were bright white. The throat and breast were off-white or pale gray. The pale gray underparts extended to the vent. The eye appeared dark. The bill appeared uniformly blood-red from the base to the tip, and seemed shorter than expected for *Sterna hirundo* and *S. forsteri*.

The legs were blood red, possibly darker than the bill, although this effect may have been due to shadow. The length of the legs appeared shorter than expected for *S. hirundo* and *S. forsteri*.

The neck appeared shorter than expected for *S. hirundo* and *S. forsteri*.

The mantle and wing coverts were pale gray, with a slightly darker gray carpal bar. The primaries at rest appeared darker gray. The primaries extended to about 1 in. to the tip of tail, which appeared elongate and uniformly white.

In flight, the bird appeared short-necked (relative to other *Sterna* terns). From above, the mantle and wings appeared uniformly gray without contrast in the flight feathers, except for dark gray (appearing black) tips to the primaries and bright white tips to the secondaries, forming a white trailing edge to the inner wing, and a black trailing edge to the outer wing. A paler window in the inner primaries and outer secondaries was absent. A blackish wedge on the primaries was absent. The underwings appeared uniformly white except for the dark gray tips to the primaries. In flight, the bird approached to 100m, and was observed from about 10 m above the bird.

Additional documentation: High 8 videotape was obtained using a Canon zoom videocamera through the Kowa telescope, as well as digital images using a Kodak digital camera. These images are available upon request. The quality of these images is unknown at the time of the writing of this report.

#### Observers' Previous Experience:

Prather-Observed *S. paradisaea* previously once in Florida (adult), twice in Colorado (first winter birds) and in Alaska (many on breeding grounds). 26 yrs experience birding, with numerous observations of similar *Sterna* species, such as *S. hirundo* and *S. forsteri*. Komar-Observed *S. paradisaea* previously once in Massachusetts (adult), twice in Colorado (adult, first-yr bird). 31 yrs experience birding, with numerous observations of similar *Sterna* species.

#### Consideration of Similar Species:

Adult *S. hirundo* was ruled out by lack of black wedge on primaries. Adult *S. forsteri* was ruled out by lack of paler window in wing morphology. Lack of black tip on bill rules out both these *Sterna* species. Red color of base of bill rules out *S. forsteri*. Red bill rules out juvenal plumages of both these *Sterna* species, as well as juv. *S. paradisaea*. Short bill, short legs, wing-to-tail ratio and wing morphology all support identification as *S. paradisaea*. Totally red bill rules out all other North American terns except *S. caspia* which is much larger than Bonaparte's Gull, square headed, heavy-billed and short tailed. We suspect this bird was in second basic plumage based upon the adult plumage characteristics with whitish feathers on the lower forecrown and nape. Other species of non-native terns were considered briefly, and incompletely. Other species of South American terns were ruled out by plumage, however, including Antarctic Tern (which is much darker gray underneath) and South American Tern (which lacks dark tips to the primaries).

#### Literature consulted:

Field guide to birds of North America, third ed., 1999

Sibley Guide to Birds, 2001

Birds of Southern South America and Antarctica, 2003



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Arctic Tern, Pueblo Res.

Mark Peterson Photo  
12/3/03



## COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

NEW STATE RECORD \_\_\_\_\_ UNUSUAL RECORD X**Species:** Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)**Date:** 1 December 2003**Number seen:** one**Sex:** ?**Plumage:** Alternate II**Locality:** Off Juniper Breaks Campground, Pueblo Res.**Elevation:** ~5000'**Nearest town:** Pueblo West**County:** Pueblo**Time observed:** mid-morning**Duration of observation:** ~1.5 minutes

**Description:** I went to see the possible Arctic Tern that had been present on Pueblo Res. since at least 23 November and which was found by Brandon Percival. I eventually saw the bird off the Juniper Breaks Campground and watched it fly by me a couple times.

The bird was an obvious medium-sized *Sterna* tern (gray upperparts, white underparts, some black on the head, long, narrow wings) that was quite pale gray above. The bill was short and black; I saw the legs briefly once, and they appeared pinkish or reddish. The forehead was white, but otherwise, the entire upper half of the head was black. The mantle was quite pale gray with a very vague darker gray carpal bar, but I noticed this only once when, I believe, the angle was perfect. The primaries were very pale and tipped quite thinly with dark gray, much less noticeable than typical of Common Tern. Additionally, the secondaries were tipped white forming a distinct white trailing edge, unlike the secondaries of a similarly-aged Common Tern, which usually still show traces of a dark subterminal bar in the secondaries. The underparts appeared all white at most times, but somewhat mottled with pale gray a couple of times. The tail was white with barely-discernible dark outer webs to the outermost rectrices.

The shape of the black on the head is very suggestive of alternate plumage, not of juvenile or basic plumage, as the lower edge of the black cut straight across the head with no intrusion of white from below. The leg color also rules out a bird in any basic plumage, as pink or red leg color in Arctic Tern is limited to very young birds and to adults in alternate plumage. Why the bill was not also at least partly reddish, I do not quite comprehend, but I do not claim at all to be an expert on the species. Though I did not see the bird perched, I have seen a video grab of such and wish to point out that the tail of the bird extended beyond the wingtips which also eliminates any age of Arctic Tern younger than a bird in Alternate II.

Similar species eliminated: Forster's Tern (the most common species of tern in CO), which is virtually always in basic plumage well before December (virtually always by September) exhibits a distinct black mask and all-white crown. Additionally, Forster's Terns also have distinctly larger bills and bigger heads than this bird had. Common Tern, the species requiring more effort to eliminate, can be ruled out by the bird's very pale primaries with only a very thin darker trailing edge; Common Tern would show obviously darker outer primaries and a wider dark trailing edge. Additionally, a Common in Alternate II should exhibit traces of a dark subterminal secondary bar, which the bird in question did not have. Though Roseate Tern is quite unlikely to show up in Colorado, that species can be eliminated from consideration by its darker outer few primaries, its longer bill, and its even paler, nearly white, mantle color.



**Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery (i.e. from perch, in flight, duration):** No vocalizations heard.

**What is your prior experience with this and similarly-appearing species?** I have seen 1000s each of Common and Forster's terns of a variety of ages, including a few in Alternate II, but had not previously seen this plumage in Arctic Tern. Additionally, I had ~50 Arctic Terns prior to this sighting.

**Light conditions:** sky was mostly cloudy with the sun to my left

**Optical equipment used:** Leica 32x

**Distance, and how estimated:** estimated closest approach of ~40 meters

**Other observers who saw the bird with you:** none

**Other observers who saw the bird independently:** Brandon Percival, Nick Komar, et al.

**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: none

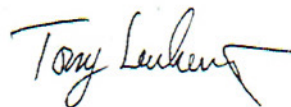
b) after observation and after writing field notes:

Olsen, K.M. and H. Larsson. 1995. Terns of Europe and North America. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Sibley, D.A. 2000. The Sibley Guide to Birds. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York.

**Reporting observer:** Tony Leukering

**Signature:**



**Address:** Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, 14500 Lark Bunting Lane, Brighton, CO 80603

**Date report was written:** 17 January and 12 September 2004 from notes written that morning and before researching in references