



360-02-1989

#360

October 30, 1989

Memo to: David A. Cutler, American Birds
Lancaster County Bird Club (Rare Bird File)
✓ Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

From: J. Eric Witmer

Subject: Sighting of Sabine's Gull in Lancaster County,
Pennsylvania

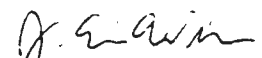
About 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, September 23, 1989, Dan and Lori Heathcote found an imm. Sabine's Gull flying near Rookery Island in the Susquehanna River, Washington Boro, Pennsylvania. The bird was viewed for about one (1) hour and could not be relocated from the shore later in the day.

Before 7:00 a.m. on Sunday, September 24, 1989, the bird was relocated by boat in the Conejohela Flats area of the Susquehanna River, Washington Boro, where the bird was observed until 1:30 p.m. The bird was photographed extensively by three of the observers, sometimes within 40 feet. On Sunday, the bird spent a lot of time resting on mudflats and often picking "shorebird-like" on mudflats close to the edge of the water.

On Friday, September 22, 1989, remnants of Hurricane Hugo passed northward through western Pennsylvania and an intense cold front (moving from west to east) followed on Saturday into eastern Pennsylvania. At the time of the initial sighting, conditions were clear and calm. By early afternoon, cloud cover and windy conditions (30 mph) prevailed. Sunday, September 24, was calm and pleasant. At least eight (8) observers were present on Sunday, including Jerry Book, Tom Garner, Dan and Lori Heathcote, Robert M. Schutsky, Jan, Pat, and Eric Witmer.

This sighting is a first record for Lancaster County.

All proper field marks should be easily noted in the two enclosed photographs made by Jan A. Witmer and taken with a 35 mm camera using a 600 mm lens and ektachrome 200 ASA film.


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pw

Find Photos

Enclosures - 2 Photographs

LANCASTER COUNTY'S FIRST RECORD OF SABINE'S GULL

On the morning of Saturday, September 23, as "Hugo" passed to the west of Pennsylvania, the call went out that Sabine's Gull had been seen. Gery Dan and Laurie Heathcote on the Susquehanna River at the Conejohela Flats just south of Washington Boro. By the time several club members could literally drop what they were doing and head to this area, the winds had shifted to the north and were accompanied by driving rain showers. The bird could not be relocated in spite of thorough observation from several vantage points, and it was feared that the strong winds carried it southward.

The "boat people", as they've been dubbed by Bob Schutsky, had already planned to go out the next day to see what spilled out of Hugo's words and the approaching cold front. They were, and still are, kicking themselves for not being out Saturday morning. Numerous shorebirds were noted by Dan and Laurie flying around the vast expanses of mud created by Safe Harbor Dam's draw-down of the water above in anticipation of heavy rains. Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Red Knots were seen by them from shore. One can only speculate what went by unobserved, especially in light of confirmed reports of Black-capped Petrel and Royal Tern in other parts of the state, and unconfirmed reports of Frigatebird and Brown Pelican in Lancaster County.

At 6:00 A.M. Sunday morning, an hour before sunrise, Jerry Cook launched his boat from the end of Blue Rock Road in hopes that the age old adage "the early bird gets the worm" would hold true. The "worm" was nearly run into at 6:10 A.M. by the boat under electric motor power. Even though little light was available, at fifteen feet it was possible to determine that the bird was probably a Sabine's Gull. A little more maneuvering of the boat and a couple of ten foot flights by the bird finally showed the white wing triangles. Sabine's Gull well still on the flats!

The boat was immediately returned to shore, hurriedly beached, and a fast drive was made to a nearby phone. After a couple of calls

were made to encourage those were planning to explore the Flats that morning to move quickly, the boat was launched again. The bird was quickly relocated on the south end of "Seaside Island" feeding with numerous shorebirds. Not wanting to disturb it, and wondering what was on the other side of the island, Jerry trudged through the mud to the west side. It wasn't long until a horrendous yell was heard coming from the boat launch site. Figuring someone had either flown from here in record time, or was in the clutches of a grizzly bear, he ran through the mud (walking is tough) to a location where he could see Tom Garner standing on shore. Tom was ferried out and the gull was soon found feeding on nearby "Knot Island". Shortly afterward, Eric, Ted, and Pat Witmer and Bob Schutsky arrived and their boat "full" of people and gear slowly plowed its way toward the islands. While they were still a distance away, the bird got up and flew southwest out of sight. They did not see it.

I still hopeful, many areas were searched. No luck! Finally, someone got a glimpse the bird near a small mudflat downriver. Once again we loaded the boats and picked our way through the shallow water. We approached to within a hundred yards and started to set up shop to observe Garcoater County's first Sabine's Gull. With that, the bird flew directly over our heads, giving a quick but barely satisfactory look. The search continued and it was later relocated on Seaside Island, but promptly moved upriver to "Sharp-tail Island", where it settled down for a while. It was here that everyone had the opportunity to observe the bird a great length and at close range.

Dan and Laure Hesthote had arrived on shore, and were soon brought out to the island so that the "finders" of the bird could more fully appreciate it at close range. Many photographs were taken to document its occurrence before it flew to "Gull Island", a small mud bar on the west side of the island chain. Shortly after that, Jerry Book announced that a Sabine's Gull was in the air for a few seconds before disappearing behind Green Island. A few seconds of silence passed before the rest of the crew said that the bird they had been watching was still on Gull Island, but out of sight. When there

a second Sabine Gull? After reviewing the days sightings and wondering how the bird got from here to there without being noticed, it was considered plausible that there may have been a second bird. We'll never know, as it or they were never seen again.

Not unnoticed, but playing second fiddle to the star performer, were many species of shorebirds. The species total for the day was fifteen, two better than our previous record for the last three years. Seventeen species were seen during the Hugo weekend.

The best shorebird moment was at Sharp-tail Island, where we could observe all five "peeps", White-rumped, Bairds, Western, Semi-palmated, and Least Sandpipers, in a ten by thirty foot pool of water at the same time. Stilt Sandpipers, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Pectoral Sandpipers kept them company, while Sanderling, Black-bellied and Semi-palmated Plover skirted the edges of the pool.

It had been a magnificent day! Yet in the lock of our minds we couldn't help but wonder what we had missed by not being out the previous day when Dan and Laurie saw small "clouds" of shorebirds drifting among the mud flats. Best assured that should such a situation be duplicated in the future, the "boat people" will be on the Flats to see if Hugo's performance can be duplicated or exceeded.

Jim Paul

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round #1 of 2

Species: **Sabine's Gull**

Date of Sighting: **September 23, 1989**

Observer(s): **Dan & Lori Heathcote, E. Witmer, J. Book**

Date of Submission: **1989**

Submitted by: **Eric Witmer, Jerry Book**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater *							
B. Haas	X						
F. Haas		X					
R. Leberman *							
G. McWilliams				X			
S. Santner			X				
P. Schwalbe						X	
TOTALS							
DECISION							

Comments: * Abstain

Send to second Round with photos.

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

Species: **Sabine's Gull**

Date of Sighting: **23 September 1989 to 24 September 1989**

Observer(s): **Dan & Lori Heathcote, E. Witmer, J. Book**

Date of Submission: **1989**

Submitted by: **Dan & Lori Heathcote, E. Witmer, J. Book**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater	X						
B. Haas	X						
F. Haas	X						
Schwabe R. Teles							
G. McWilliams	X						
S. Santner							
Leberman Santner							
TOTALS							
DECISION							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

Species: **Sabine's Gull (Larus sabini)**

Date of Sighting: **23 September 1989 to 24 September 1989**

Location: **WASHINGTON BORO**

County: **LANCASTER**

Observer(s): **Dan & Lori Heathcote; E. Witmer; J. Book**

Date of Submission: **1989**

Submitted by: **Dan & Lori Heathcote; E. Witmer; J. Book**

Written Description: **YES** Photo: **YES** Specimen: **NO**

Recording: **NONE**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas	X							
N. Pulcinella	X							
E. Kwater	X							
R. Ickes	X							
G. McWilliams	X							
P. Schwalbe	X							
J. Skinner	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

J C Haas

Date:

3-31-95