

Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*)
1 Alternate-plumaged Adult
August 18, 2009
Laurel Hill State Park
Somerset, PA
Somerset County

Circumstances of Observation: At approximately 0920 on August 18, 2009, I walked on to the top of the dam of the reservoir at Laurel Hill State Park. I scanned the water's surface and immediately picked out a small gull on the surface of the water approximately 400 meters away, actively swimming and picking items off the surface of the water. It was the only bird visible on the lake at the time. I did not have a spotting scope with me, and had to study the bird at a distance with binoculars. The sky was overcast and the bird was observed in favorable light for the duration of the observation, with the dark green water of the lake as a background, since I was viewing it from above. My initial impression was immediately that of a small hooded gull, as the bird was in full breeding plumage with a solidly black head. After several minutes of observation I concluded that the bird was an adult Sabine's Gull in alternate plumage. During this observation period the bird took off and made short flights twice, in which it came slightly closer (approximately 375 meters away), and made its upperwing and underwing patterns visible. I watched the bird until approximately 0935, when I left to retrieve a spotting scope so some digiscoped images of the gull could be attempted. When I returned to the area at 1025 I could not relocate the bird. Attempts by myself and other observers the next day also failed to find the bird.

Habitat: The lake at Laurel Hill State Park is approximately 65 acres in size, and has a variety of shoreline habitats, ranging from sandy and bare of vegetation to marshy to thick forest growth down to the water's edge. From my recent observations there, it does not seem to support many waterbirds in the late summer and early fall, although this may not hold true for other seasons. I would not anticipate any gull to remain at the site for very long due to its small size and lack of foraging opportunities, but one may use the lake as a resting area or brief stopover site.

Description: A small gull, substantially smaller than a Ring-billed Gull. My first impression was that of a Bonaparte's Gull in terms of size and proportions. A small, dainty looking gull, about the size of a Bonaparte's. The underparts, tail, breast, neck and nape were white. The head appeared completely black (see "additional information" for more on head color), with the dark border of the "hood" starting at the mid to lower throat and rising towards the top of the nape in back of its head. There were no white eye-arcs. The bill was black with a yellow tip, with the distal 1/3 or 1/4 length yellow and the rest black. It was difficult to make a judgement on the size of the bill due to the distance between myself and the bird, but it seemed small, similar to Bonaparte's, but perhaps thicker overall. The mantle was a moderate gray for a gull, somewhere between the shade of a Bonaparte's and a Franklin's Gull. Primaries were black with, large, well-defined white tips. In flight, the upperwing pattern was a striking, gray, white and black; very "triangular" to try to explain it in terms of gist. The outer primaries and outer

primary coverts were black, all the way up to the bend in the leading edge wing (the "wrist"). Inner primaries, secondaries, and some greater coverts were white, appearing as a white triangle, or wedge, between the black of the outer wing and the gray of the mantle and greater (some), median and lesser coverts. The underwing of the bird, viewed very briefly, appeared mostly white, without the contrasting upperwing pattern being highly visible. These characters, but particularly the all-dark hood, black bill tipped with yellow, and distinctive upperwing pattern, lead me to identify the bird as an adult, alternate-plumaged Sabine's Gull.

Leg color was not observed, as the bird spent most of the time on the surface of the water and I was unable to see its legs in the brief time the bird's underside was visible in flight. I cannot comment on flight pattern, since I was concentrating on observing the wing patterns during the short flights it took. No vocalizations were heard.

Similar species: Terns can be discounted from structural differences; the bird observed was heavier and less delicate looking than most species (aside from Caspian), lacked a forked tail, was longer-necked, round-headed and had a blunt-tipped bill. The bird in question seemed quite comfortable resting and swimming on the surface of the water, which is not common behavior for most terns. Bill color in combination with plumage and structural details mentioned above safely eliminate all American terns from consideration.

The "hooded" gulls (those species that have mostly dark heads in alternate plumage) known to occur in the U.S. on a regular basis are a more likely source for potential confusion. I will limit discussion to field marks that I can compare with the gull I observed, so for example I will omit leg color since it was not observed on this individual. A solidly dark hood, without any white visible within its border, clearly indicates alternate plumage for any of these species; I will confine discussion to that plumage.

These species include Laughing, Franklin's, Black-headed, Bonaparte's and Little Gulls. Franklin's and Laughing Gulls can be eliminated by their larger size, white eye arcs above and below the eye, and deep to bright red bills, which would be very visible in an alternate plumaged bird. Black-headed Gulls have darker red bills, a brownish tinge to the hood (although it's uncertain if this could be discerned from such a distance), limited white eye arcs, as well as a paler mantle than the individual observed. Bonaparte's Gulls have white eye arcs, and an entirely black bill. Black-headed and Bonaparte's Gulls both have a contrasting gray, white and black upperwing pattern, but the black is confined to the outer primary tips, the remainder of the primaries and primary coverts are white, and the rest of the wing is gray. This pattern, although contrasting and consisting of the same colors, does not closely resemble that of Sabine's Gull, which shows extensive black on the outer primaries and primary coverts, and white on the inner primaries and secondaries, extending up to the bend of the wing (as seen in flight). Overall, these black and white areas take up much more of the wing on a Sabine's. Neither Bonaparte's or Black-headed Gulls typically display conspicuous white-tipped primaries when viewed at rest. In addition, Black-headed Gulls show extensive black on the underwing. Little

Gulls are smaller, with extensive black on the underwing. The upperwing appears as a clean gray and white pattern, and the primaries are pale.

The combination of this bird's entirely dark "hood", lack of white eye-arcs, black bill with yellow tip, and unique wing pattern clearly eliminates all of these species from consideration.

Prior Experience: I have extensive prior field experience with most North American terns, as well as Laughing, Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls, and limited experience with Little and Black-headed Gulls. I have observed 250+ Sabine's Gulls of all plumages and ages in California's offshore waters. I consider Sabine's Gulls to be a very uniquely plumaged gull (unlike most), and have never had any difficulty with identifying this species within their normal range.

Optics used: Leica 10X42 BN binoculars.

Other Observers: None.

Photos/Video: None.

Reporting Observer Information:

Steve Tucker
811 Jasper Ave.
Ventura, CA 93004
seagullsteve@gmail.com

Additional Information: The description of this bird was written on August 18, 2009, within hours of the observation; I did not take field notes at the time because although I realized Sabine's Gull must be quite rare in this region, I did not know there were less than 15 records in the state! The rest of this report was written by August 19-20, 2009, and submitted to the PORC for review on August 20, 2009.

The dark gray hood with black lower border, a unique feature of this species (Sibley, 2000), could not possibly have been observable due to the distance between myself and the bird and the lack of high power optics. These circumstances rendered the appearance of an all-black head.

The Sibley Guide To Birds (Sibley, 2000) was reviewed in order to check information on similar species. My field identification of the Sabine's Gull was done from experience, and without the aid of any field guides.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Sabine's Gull Xema sabini

Date of Sighting: 18 August 2009 to 18 August 2009

County : SOMERSET

Location : LAUREL HILL STATE PARK

Observer(s): Steve Tucker

Date of Submission: 2009

Submitted by: Steve Tucker

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No


Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut			X					
A. Guarente			X					
T. Johnson			X					
B. Coulter			X					
C. Rutt			X					
J. Heller			X					
G. Malosh			X					
TOTALS			7					
DECISION			X					

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

11/6/09