

SOOTY TERN
Sterna fuscata

375-02-1996

Date: 7 September 1996
Location: Delaware River opposite the Philadelphia Airport, Essington Delaware County.
Weather: Mostly overcast with some periods of brief sunlight. Winds East 15-20 mph. Temp. 70Æs. Tropical Storm Fran had passed about 150-200 west of this area during the night.
Optics: 7x42 field glasses and 20-60x spotting scope.

Details: With the passage of Tropical Storm Fran about 200 miles to the east during the previous night, I searched the Delaware River area hoping to find any birds that might have been carried into the area from the storm. This bird was first noticed flying north along the western shore of Tincium Island. It then passed within 150-200 yards of me and continued on a northward course until it was out of sight. During its pass it skimmed the surface of the water twice and was continually harassed by both Ring-billed (*Larus delawarensis*) and Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*)

Description: Taken from notes made immediately following the sighting

General appearance: A medium sized dark brown tern about or slightly smaller than a Laughing Gull with an elongated tail.

Head: Brown with what appeared to be a white crown.

Upper parts: Generally brown all over including wings and back.

Under parts: Breast and belly appeared generally brown.

Wings. Above were the same color as the body. Underwings were a paler brown-gray in the area of the secondaries to near the tip of the primaries.

Tail: The tail was brown, elongated and and at eye level did not appear forked. When the bird banked with its back facing me the tail opened and appeared slightly forked.

Bare parts: Details of bare parts were not noted.

Discussion and Separation from similar species: The appearance of what seemed to be a white crown, the lack of a white belly, and elongated tail caused me to call this bird initially a Brown Noddy. When I looked at the slides of the bird and reviewed my notes again several discrepancies began to appear. The color of the underwings on one slide showed a pattern more typical of a juv. Sooty Tern than the underwing pattern of a Brown Noddy.

Also my notation of the tail being slightly forked when the bird was banking was inconsistent with a notched tail of a Brown Noddy. Subsequently, I have noticed juv. Ring-billed Gulls flying up the Delaware River in similar lighting conditions that appear to have a white crown. This white crown appearance is the result of a reflection of sunlight, sort of a glimmer or sheen of white on the head. Because of these discrepancies I had the slides reviewed by other birders (P. Lehman, M. O'Brien and D. Sibley) who have agreed that the slides represent a juv. Sooty Tern.

Experience with this species: I have seen thousands of adult Sooty Terns at the Dry Tortugas but this was only the third juv. Sooty Tern I had seen, the previous two occurring only a short time earlier the same day. I have also seen many adult Brown Noddy on the Dry Tortugas.

Nick Pulcinella
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Swarthmore, PA 19081

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*)

Date of Sighting: 7 September 1996 to 7 September 1996

Location: PHILADELPHIA AIRPORT AREA

County: DELAWARE

Observer(s): Nick Pulcinella

Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Nick Pulcinella

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		X					
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
S. Feldstein				X				
TOTALS	1		4	1				1
DECISION			X					

Comments:

~~Scout for second round.~~

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

8-16-97