

Sooty Tern
Sterna fuscata

375-03-1996

Date: 7 September 1996
Location: Delaware River opposite the Philadelphia Airport, Essington Delaware County.
Weather: Mostly cloudy with some periods of sunlight. Winds East 15-20 mph. Temp. 70Æs.. Tropical Storm Fran had passed about 150-200 west of this area during the night.
Optics: 10x42 and 7x42 field glasses and 20-60x spotting scopes.

Details: With the passing of Tropical Storm Fran to the east during the night we searched the Delaware River in Essington for any possible birds that may have been deposited there from the storm. We had been watching for about an hour, when a dark tern appeared near the northern tip of Tinicum Island. We watched the bird approach and noticed the dark overall color, dark wings with pale underwings from the secondaries to near the end of the primaries and a forked tail. This bird then turned north and passed over the Philadelphia Airport and continued in a northerly direction until it was out of sight.

About fifteen minutes later a second dark tern approached us again near the tip of Tinicum Island. This bird was a bit closer and provided better looks.

As with the first bird, the general color was a dark brown all over, with the same pale underwings. We noticed this bird had a white belly and a forked tail. We looked over our notes from both sightings and then consulted Harrison's Seabirds guide and found that the birds we saw fit the description for juvenile Sooty Tern. It seems in our excitement during the observation of the first bird we neglected to look for the white belly, but feel confident that it could not have been any other species. The second bird continued to fly north up the river and was persistently harassed by Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*).

Description: Bird # 1

General appearance: A medium sized dark tern roughly the size of a Laughing Gull dark above and below with long pointed wings and a forked tail.

Head: Dark brown, no white apparent.

Upperparts: A dark brown overall.

Underparts: A dark brown. We failed to look for a white belly.

Tail: Dark brown and deeply forked.

Wings: Dark above. The underwings dark with a pale gray-brown from the secondaries to near the tips of the primaries.

Bill: Dark.

Separation from similar species: Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*) - bird #1 had a deeply forked tail and pale gray underwings. Bird #2 had a white belly and a noticeable forked tail and pale gray underwings. Both birds were also darker in color than a Brown Noddy.

Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*)- at this season, Black Tern would not be in dark black alternate plumage, but

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would be in a late stage of molt into a paler basic plumage.

Experience with species: NP - has observed thousands of adult Sooty Terns on several trips to the Dry Tortugas, but this was a first experience with a juvenile. AG - has seen adult Sooty Tern in the Caribbean, but never a juvenile.

These birds were part of a widespread distribution of Sooty Terns throughout the mid-atlantic states as a result of Tropical Storm Fran. These sightings also constitute the first records for this species in Delaware County.

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375-04-1996

Sooty Tern in Delaware County
by Al Guarente

On Saturday, September 7, 1996, I was birding along the Delaware River in Tinicum, Delaware County with my cousin Nick Pulcinella. We had decided the previous day to go to the river to see if Tropical Storm Fran brought in any vagrants to our area of southeast Pennsylvania.

We arrived at 6:45 AM and the weather was mostly clear with a few scattered clouds and a wind of about 10 knots. Neither one of us was hopeful of finding any vagrants since Fran had passed about 200 miles to the west of us and also because the weather today was so nice. Southeastern Pa never even knew there was a Tropical Storm in the region. We received only a minimal amount of rainfall from the storm.

At 7:30 AM, Nick spotted a dark bird flying up river accompanied by a Laughing Gull. The bird was approximately the same size as the gull but flew with the flight pattern of a tern. As the bird started approaching closer I could see the bird was a dark brown color all over. When the bird would veer I could see that the tail was distinctively forked, not notched, but deeply forked like a Forster's Tern, only slightly shorter. The bill was dark. The under wing pattern showed grayish-white areas on the secondaries and the first two or three inner primaries. The bird had no other distinguishing marks. This caused some confusion because we knew Sooty Terns had black upper parts and white underparts. But having written down the field marks as described above, we then turned to the Seabirds guide and looked up Sooty Tern. What we found was a near match for the juvenile Sooty Tern. However, we didn't notice the whitish lower belly on this bird. Nevertheless, I was still confident that what we saw was indeed a Sooty Tern. The bird flew off over the Phila Airport runways and kept heading in a northerly direction until it was out of sight.

Within 15 minutes Nick spotted another dark tern, also flying up river, but this time a bit closer. This bird also appeared all dark above, with no white on the head, but this time we were able to see quick glimpses of the whitish area on the posterior end of the belly area and the undertail coverts. We were now certain that this also was a juvenile Sooty Tern. We believe this individual was a different bird.

Viewing time for the first individual was approximately 3 minutes, while the second tern was in view for about 1-2 minutes. Viewing conditions were ideal with each bird at eye level or just slightly above eye level and the sunlight at our side.

In conclusion, I believe that we saw two juvenile Sooty Terns in Delaware County, PA. Although it seemed that our area of Pennsylvania was only slightly affected by Fran, the storm obviously had a bigger impact than I thought.

Al Guarente
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Media, PA 19063

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

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; Al Guarente

Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Nick Pulcinella; Al Guarente

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas		X						
P. Schwalbe		X						
E. Kwater							X	
R. Ickes		X						
S. Feldstein				X				
J. McWilliams		X						
N. Pulcinella		X						
TOTALS		5		1			1	
DECISION				X				

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of 2

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S. Feldstein				X				
TOTALS		5		1			1	
DECISION								

Comments:

Send to second round.

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

8-16-97