

**Rare Bird Documentation for PORC:**

375-02-2003

**Species:** Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*)

**Number:** 1

**Sex, age, plumage:** Juvenile

**Date/time of observation:**

The bird was seen for several minutes at approximately 10:30 on Friday, 19 September 2003.

**Location:**

The bird was seen over Lake Nockamixon from the pier at the marina in Nockamixon State Park, upper Bucks County, PA.

**Observer(s):**

Bill Etter

1030 Old Bethlehem Road #2

Perkasie, PA 18944

better@netcarrier.com

215-258-0229

Butch Lishman, Eleanor Harding and Dave Birchler also observed the bird.

**Habitat:** The bird was seen flying over Lake Nockamixon from the marina pier to well below the fishing pier, a distance of approximately 1.5 miles.

**Conditions:** Viewing conditions on Friday, 19 Sept were very good. The tern approached us from the east, so initial view revealed only a silhouette against the mid morning east sky. As the bird circled around and began to head southwest, however, the angle of light proved beneficial.

**Distance / Optics:** I observed the bird in its approach using 8x24 binoculars. It was within about 50 yards of us at the time and circling; too close to be able to switch to the scope. As the bird began to head southwest, I made the switch to my 20x spotting scope. I picked the bird up in the scope at a distance of approximately 75 yards, and followed it for several minutes as it slowly flew down the lake. I watched it continuously until it was just a speck in the distance.

**Description:**

As the bird approached, I initially assumed it would be a gull. There were several Ring-billed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls present that morning. As I looked more closely, the shape seemed wrong for either. At this point the bird was to the east and below the sun, so detail was obscured. The wings were too pointed and the flight was too bouncy for any of the expected gulls. The bill was also too long in proportion to the head. The head was dark, but not hooded. The dark coloration extended down the throat and onto

the breast of the bird. The belly was pale. The undersides of the wings were difficult to determine. The bird was too close and backlit at this point to make further observations, but it was clearly smaller in size than a Ring-billed Gull, yet larger than any expected 'small' tern (Black Tern in particular)! Admittedly, there were no other birds present with which to compare – I'm only relating my impression of the so-called 'jizz' of the bird when it comes to size. I can add that the site from which the bird was viewed is a hawkwatch situated in the middle of a large lake. I had manned the watch for at least 40 hours over the previous week. During that time, many, many gulls as well as quite a few terns (mostly Forster's) had passed by in a similar fashion. This bird seemed unusual from the start, even without immediately recognizable field marks.

As the bird began to fly slowly away from us, I switched to my scope. It headed west, and grew increasingly easier to view as it got out from under the sun. It became apparent that the bird's back upper wing was a nearly uniform charcoal color. My impression was that it was close in hue to that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull. As it banked and turned, I saw an under wing that was pale but darkened on the trailing edge. The wing was most dark in the primaries. The extension of the sooty charcoal coloration on the throat and upper breast of the bird was apparent. The belly, vent and undertail coverts were white. The tail itself seemed to be only slightly forked. This presented a problem at the time, and continues to bother me somewhat. Possible explanations include the play of light upon the bird and/or individual variation. I've made the same observation of Forster's Terns in the past.

**Behavior:** The bird flew slowly down the center of the lake, bobbing, sinking and banking at times, in typical tern manner. It did not dive at all, but picked at the water's surface once or twice.

**Vocalizations:** None

**Identification:** Sooty Tern (juvenile)

**Separation from similar species:** The bird's fully dark head, throat and upper breast eliminate Bridled Tern of any age. Other species might be expected to have at least a partially blackish head and throat in September. Of these, White-winged Tern would be far paler overall. Black Tern would be the most obvious possibility. I believe that Black Tern is eliminated for a few reasons: The color on the back and wing was much too dark for any Black Tern. The bird that I observed was clearly pale under the wing, with a darker trailing edge and darker primaries. I am also certain that this bird was much too large to be a Black Tern. In addition to my initial size impression upon the bird's closest approach, I can add that, on other occasions, I have viewed Black Terns from this same distance and from the same vantage point. They have appeared quite similar to a swallow at this distance in my experience.

**Supporting evidence:** None.

**Other relative details:** This bird was seen following the passage of Hurricane Isabel. The eye of the storm had passed through the western portion of the state on the previous night.

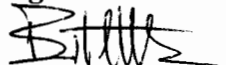
**Previous experience:** I've had no previous experience with Sooty Tern (but have observed Black Tern on several occasions, including later that day...).

**Certainty of identification:** I am confident in my identification of this bird.

**References consulted:** I checked The Sibley Guide to Birds first, then Terns of Europe and North America (Olsen and Larsson), which I had on hand at the time. I've also looked at several pictorial sources on the internet.

**Date of report:** 22 Sep, 2003.

**Signature of observer:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Etter', with a stylized, cursive script.

Bill Etter  
Perkasie, PA

# Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

## Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*)

Date of Sighting: 19 September 2003 to 19 September 2003

Location: LAKE NOCKAMIXON

County : BUCKS

Observer(s): Bill Etter, Eleanor Harding, Dave Birchler, Butch Lishman

Date of Submission: 2003

Submitted by: Bill Etter,

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

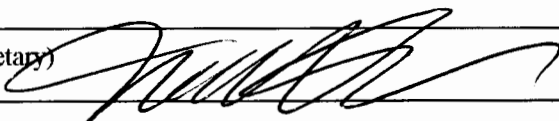
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
<del>G. Armistead</del> R. WITMER			X					
D. Heathcote			X					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer			X					
R. Leberman			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			7					
DECISION			X					

Comments: 7/10

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

9/16/04