

February 23, 2005

Mark McCoanughy  
Bushy Run Battlefield Box 468  
Harrison City, PA 15636

Mark

Many thanks for sending the documentation on the Least Tern you identified on August 12, 2001. The report circulated through the committee twice and eventually was voted down with 1 vote to accept and 5 to reject. On the first round the vote was 4 to 3 but on reconsidering most committee members felt that given the distances involved neither the photos nor the written description were detailed enough to make a definitive judgment. Much of the identification rested on the apparent size of the bird with a Killdeer used as a comparison species. Given the great difference in build this may have been mis-leading. Based on my experience, at the distances involved, I would expect a Killdeer to appear considerably larger than a Least Tern and to be more comparable to a Common or Forster's Tern, especially a juv./first winter bird as this one most likely was given it showed a dark carpal bar which generally does not appear in adults until later in the year. The average lengths given in most field guides are often misleading when used to compare the sizes of birds, which is more related to mass than length. In terms of mass a least tern is more comparable to a calidris sandpiper than a Killdeer since most of its length consists of feathers.

Also providing admittedly circumstantial evidence, a member of the committee was at the same location on the same day and from a closer distance identified a Forster's Tern in the same place. While this certainly does not prove or dis-prove anything it does add an additional factor to consider.

Sincerely

Matt Sharp  
Chair: Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee.

372-02-2001

**Least Tern**  
*Sterna antillarum*

Shenango Reservoir  
12 August 2001  
by Mark McConaughy

A late summer outing by the Westmoreland Bird Club that I led to Shenango Reservoir found a Least Tern sitting on an island out in the reservoir from Golden Run Access. It was seen first from the eastern viewing area (near the wooden blind) by one of the outing members (Tom Kuell?) who was following my instructions to look for something that was different in size from the ~75 Ring-billed Gulls and Canada Geese on the island. A Caspian Tern was also seen near it and provided some scale, along with the other birds. Tom called and said he had a very small tern in his scope and said I should check it out. I figured it was going to be a small gull, like a Bonaparte's when he said it was small, but he correctly identified it as a small tern. When I got my scope on the bird, it was very clear it was a very, very small tern! It was similar in size to a Killdeer that walked by it on the island.

We took some time looking at the bird in the scopes. The bird was standing like a tern when it wasn't preening (which it was doing a lot) -- sort of giving a horizontal impression from the head to the tail as opposed to the sort of diagonal stance of the Ring-bills. It did not have a totally black cap, but there was a dark gray to black line from the eyes that ran horizontally around the back of the head. The top of the head was white. The bird also had a small, totally dark, black-looking bill. The breast of the bird was white. The belly was a very light gray. The back and wings were a light gray with darker gray primaries which could be seen at the rear of the bird with the wings folded and a dark gray "smudge" on the shoulder coverts. The legs were a light-color, but the color could not be made out exactly at the distance it was observed. As mentioned above, it was close to the size of the Killdeer in the same area, much smaller than a Caspian Tern, Ring-billed Gull and Canada Geese that also were nearby.

We all pulled out various field guides to check for useful identifying field marks for small terns. We had Peterson's, National Geographic, Sibley's and Kaufman's guides with us and checked them while looking at the bird. The only small terns of that are similar in size to that of a Killdeer are Black Tern, White-winged Tern and Least Tern. The Black Tern would have had an overall darker gray color than the observed bird and it clearly was not a Black Tern. An adult winter plumage White-winged Tern would also be somewhat darker and has a sort of upward-smudge behind the eye instead of a horizontal one as seen in this bird. Breeding plumage adult and immature White-winged Terns are definitely darker or have other markings not seen in this bird, like the brown back of the immature. Also, given its range, it is very, very unlikely that a White-winged Tern would appear inland at this site without hurricane assistance! The only White-winged Tern I've ever seen was over on the Delaware Coast at Pikering Beach. Another

372-02-2001

species that was considered was a Common Tern which are slightly larger than a Killdeer and have some similarities to the observed bird. However, even in full winter adult plumage, Common Terns display a black line back from the eye curves upwards more than that observed in this bird and the top of the head should show more black on it than what was seen on the observed bird. Thus, based on size and appearance, the bird was not a Common Tern or any other larger tern. It is not a Black Tern or White-winged Tern. The conclusion was the bird best fitted the Sibley depiction of a first year Least Tern.

I did take some photographs of the bird through my scope using my digital camera. I took some shots through my fixed 32X wide angle objective with the camera set on its 3X setting (effective magnification of 96X) and also through the 60X of a 20-60X zoom objective and the camera lens set at 3X (effective magnification of 180X). Unfortunately, even with these aids, the bird was too far away for good photographs. We could see more with our eyes through the scopes due to resolution problems with my low resolution digital camera (640 x 480 pixels). The bird was so small that it basically was only a few pixels in size even through the scope. I have attached a couple of the shots which show the bird which at least provide size comparisons and which do show a couple of fuzzy field marks that really are blurred due to the resolution problems.

The first two shots are ltern01c.jpg and ltern02c.jpg. These were shot with the 32X objective. They show a small white (shows the white top of the head which is down as the bird is preening) "speck" of a bird alone in the center of the photograph on the edge of the island. A Caspian Tern is over to the right, Ring-billed gulls are behind, and a Canada Goose is to the left of this bird. The white "speck" bird is the Least Tern and the photos clearly show it is really a small bird versus those other birds.

The rest of the photos (ltern09.jpg, ltern10c.jpg, ltern12c.jpg, ltern13c.jpg) were all taken with the 60X objective lens and provide a little larger image and detail. The Least Tern is in the center of these photos with Ring-billed Gulls on either side and a Canada Goose to the left and behind the left Ring-billed Gull. The bird is preening its white breast so the head is bent downward. The dark gray to black eyeline is noticeable as a vertical line on the head in these photos since the head is bent down. The light gray back and a spot of the darker primaries at the rear of the bird can also be seen in these photos.

I apologize for the quality of the photos, but they were the best I could get under the circumstances!



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**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Tabulation Form - Round One**

Species: Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*)

Date of Sighting: 12 August 2001 to 12 August 2001

Location: SHENANGO RESERVOIR

County: WESTMORELAND

Observer(s): Mark McCoanughy

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: Mark McCoanughy

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

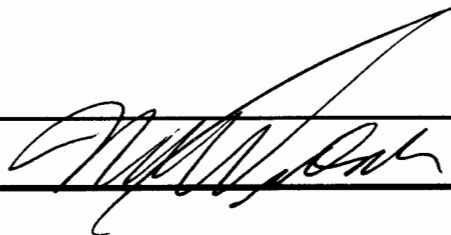
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead					X			
D. Heathcote			X					
P. Hess					X			
J. Stanley				X				
E. Witmer	X							
R. Leberman			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS	1		3	1	3			
DECISION								

Comments: 4/3 Gu to 2nd round

Signature (Secretary):



Date:

8/25/01