

Least Tern

Sturnula antillarum

Observer: Jerry McWilliams

Location: Sunset Point

Date: October 19, 2017

Time: 8:30 AM

Weather: Variably cloudy, wind SW to 10 mph, temp. 55 F

Viewing distance: Perhaps $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from me.

Optics: Kowa spotting scope from 20X to 30X.

Details: I was conducting my waterbird count on a rather slow day of movement when at 8:30 AM I spotted a very small gull-like bird moving in from the northeast. When first seen, I thought it was an immature Little Gull mainly because of the small size and dark M pattern on the upperside as it was flying towards me at an angle. It continued moving past me in a westerly direction about ten feet above the surface of the water giving me the opportunity to get a better look. Even though it was far offshore I could clearly see plumage markings, and that it was very small, especially noted when a Herring Gull past by it. The flight was fast with much twisting and turning and rather rapid wing beats. The wings were very narrow with sharply defined black outer primaries contrasting with the pale inner primaries. The rest of the wings and mantle were pale gray highlighted with a dusky bar at the leading edge of the forewing, which looked a little paler than the black outer primaries. There was a distinctive narrow black bar from the eye to the back of the head. The bill appeared all dark. The tail was very short. The entire underside of the bird was white. I was able to study the bird carefully through my spotting scope in good light until it moved west and out of sight. Because of the distance from shore and the brief time that it was in view, a photo of the bird could not be obtained. Common and Forster's terns could be ruled out based on the small size and very different wing pattern. Also the wing beats were too fast for either, not labored with deep strokes. I am quite familiar with Least Terns and have seen them in multiple places in the United States as well as in my own Erie County.