

362-01-1994

TO: Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee  
FROM: Jerry Book  
SUBJECT: Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*)  
DATE: August 16, 1994

On August 11, 1994, at about 1:10 PM, I was scoping a mudflat on the Susquehanna River-Conejohela Flats, locally known as Avocet Point. This mudflat lies approximately 350/400 feet off shore, and my vantage point placed me about 20 feet above water level. The day was mostly cloudy without any glare and the winds were light out of the south-west. As I was scanning the area, noticing both Forster's Terns and Ring-billed Gulls, a larger tern with very evenly colored whitish-gray upper parts (a little darker than the very pale Forster's Terns) passed through the field of view. It angled upward and directly away providing a very good examination of upper part coloration and the slightly forked tail. It then banked to the left allowing a nice look at the proportionally short, thick, black bill and the black cap. It was obvious that I was looking at Gull-billed Tern. It continued to cruise over the mudflat and adjacent shallow water permitting continuous evaluation of its field marks. The tern never landed on the mudflat and did not show any signs of feeding. After five minutes, I drove to a nearby phone to report the sighting. When I returned, the bird could not be relocated. It was looked for by others during the remainder of the day and the following day to no avail.

As already mentioned, the tern had a very even whitish-gray coloration throughout the upper parts, except for its solid black cap which extended to the base of the upper mandible. I was not able to discern any darker coloring on the tips of the primaries. There did seem to be a narrow shade darker color of gray near the inner web of the slightly forked tail, but it was not prominent. The bird appeared noticeably larger than the Forster's Terns, owing to its broader wings and overall bulkier build. Its wing beat was slower than that of the Forster's Terns. The under parts were white, including the under wings. However, I was not able to get a good look at the under side of the primaries since the tern was at eye level or below for the entire viewing period. The black bill was both proportionally short and thick for a tern. It did not just appear to be thick, it was

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thick, and without much taper for most of its length. Unlike the bill of the Caspian Tern (also in the area at the time of the sighting), which has a thick, but slightly tapered and proportionally "normal" length bill, this tern's bill was proportionally short.

The only good candidate for confusion that I'm aware of would be Sandwich Tern. This species could be a problem if the pale tip to its bill were not visible and thus the bill would appear short. It would not look as thick as Gull-billed, but might look untapered and blunt. Sandwich Tern has a more deeply forked tail than Gull-billed, but if some of the tail feathers were missing, it might show a less deep fork. Sandwich Tern is also a slimmer bird with slightly longer and slimmer wings. It presents a trimmer appearance in contrast to that of the bulkier, broader winged Gull-billed. However, slimmer-trimmer-bulky -broad are all subjective terms.

The three characters that clearly eliminate Sandwich Tern from consideration is that its white rump contrasts with the grayer upper parts, it shows a dark wedge on the outer three to four primaries, and it would show a partial or totally white forehead by mid-August (Seabirds-Harrison: states that some white feathering is present in the forehead by mid-June and is completely white by late August). The bird I saw had no contrast between rump and upper part coloration, did not have noticeably darker primaries, and had a black cap that extended all the way to the upper mandible.

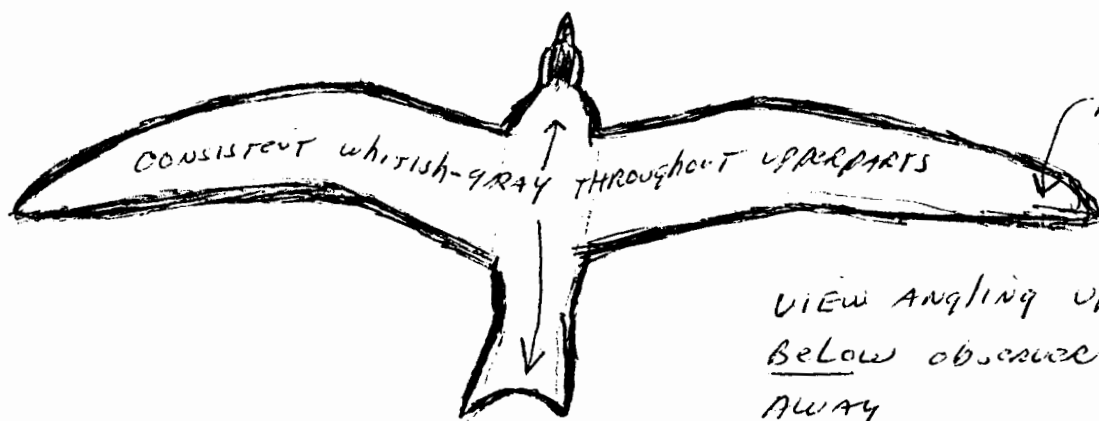
Caspian, Royal, Elegant Terns can be eliminated on bill color, size, and several other factors. Common, Forster's, Arctic, Roseate Terns can be eliminated on bill shape, more deeply forked tails, size, and the overall trim appearance they present. Black, White-winged, and Whiskered Terns need not be discussed.

All observations were made using a Kowa TSN-4 at 20 to 40 power. Viewing conditions were excellent under mostly cloudy conditions that provided good contrast and color perception.

I've enclosed the rough information sheet and drawing that I prepared the day of the sighting.

*Jerry Book*  
Jerry Book

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DARKER PRIMARIES OR  
PRIMARY TIPS NOT  
NOTED - NOT SEEN;  
DIDN'T STAND OUT  
IF PRESENT

VIEW ANGLING UPWARD FROM  
BELOW OBSERVER & DIRECTLY  
AWAY



SIDE VIEW  
IN FLIGHT

- 
- FORSTERS, COMMON, & ARTIC TERNS
- ① HAVE MORE DEEPLY FORKED TAILS
  - ② HAVE PROPORTIONALLY LONGER, FINE TAPERED BILLS
  - ③ SHOULD SHOW SOME CONTRAST ON UPPERPARTS, PARTICULARLY IF NOT IN MOLT
  - ④ WINGS APPEAR LESS BROAD
  - ⑤ WING-BEAT QUICKER / SNAPPIER

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**GULL-BILLED TERN**  
**(*STERNA NILOCTICA*)**

The Conejohela Flats, in Lancaster Co., is well known throughout Pennsylvania as a hotspot for finding rarities. This reputation was demonstrated once again on 11 August 1994, when Jerry Book found a Gull-billed Tern flying among the numerous gulls and terns in an area of the flats known locally as Avocet Point. Jerry observed the bird for about five minutes from a distance of 350-400 feet using a KOWA TSN-4 scope at 20x-40x in the early afternoon under mostly cloudy skies:

The following details are from the report submitted to P.O.R.C.

**SIZE:** Slightly larger than nearby Forster's Terns (*Sterna fosteri*), but its bulk made it seem larger.

**HEAD:** Black cap extending to the base of the bill.

**UPPERPARTS:** Evenly colored whitish-gray (a little darker than the very pale Forster's Terns)

**UNDERPARTS:** White, including the underwings.

**TAIL:** Slightly forked.

**BILL:** Proportionally shorter and thicker than Forster's Terns, and was not finely tapered at the tip; Bill entirely black. It did not just appear thick, it was thick.

A species that sometimes is confused with the Gull-billed Tern is the Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*). In his report, Jerry lists several field marks for eliminating the Sandwich Tern in this sighting. He notes the presence of the thick bill as opposed to the finely tapered bill of the Sandwich, the rump and upperparts being the same color in the Gull-billed and the rump and upperparts showing some contrast in the Sandwich, and the absence of darker primaries on the upperwing and the deeply forked tail of the Sandwich.

Other features which separate this tern from Sandwich and other terns, is its basic structure, consisting of broader more rounded wings, a heavy appearing body and a larger more rounded head. This heavy bodied appearance along with a shallow-forked tail suggest a gull rather than a tern. At close range the dark gull-like bill and longer legs are a dead give away. Its "kay-did" or "kay-tih-did" call is distinctive. When observed, the Gull-billed is usually seen

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hawking insects over mudflats or fields, though it occasionally dives in the water for small fish.

The range of this species is cosmopolitan, in western North America, it breeds only at the Salton Sea in California. In eastern North America it breeds along the Gulf coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida northward along the Atlantic as far north as Long Island. The Gull-billed is a regular breeder in nearby New Jersey and Delaware. In winter it can be found from the Gulf coast southward.

STATUS IN PA: Accidental. There are four records prior to 1890 (Poole 1964), but these could not be verified. Presently, there is one other record of this species under consideration by P.O.R.C., that is of three birds seen together flying over the John Heinz NWR at Tinicum, Delaware Co. 14 August 1992.

#### REFERENCES:

Harrison, P., 1983. Seabirds, an identification guide. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston, MA.

Poole, E.L., 1964. Pennsylvania Birds. Livingston Publishing, Narberth, PA.

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of**

Species: **Gull-billed Tern (Sterna nilotica)**

Date of Sighting: **11 August 1994 to 11 August 1994**

Location: **WASHINGTON BORO**

County: **LANCASTER**

Observer(s): **Jerry Book**

Date of Submission: **1994**

Submitted by: **Jerry Book**

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					
N. Pulcinella			X					
E. Kwater			X					
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
J. Skinner			X					
<b>TOTALS</b>			7					
<b>DECISION</b>			X					

Comments:

*First Accepted State Record.*

Signature (Secretary):

*F. C. Haas*

Date:

*3-31-95*