

364-01-2011

Royal Tern at Nockamixon State Park, Bucks County, 28 August 2011

Observer: Geoff Malosh, 450 Amherst Ave., Moon Township, PA 15108-2654
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Facts: Temperature: ~70F, Wind: W or WNW 30+ MPH, gusts to 50+ Sky: heavy clouds

Time: ~1:30pm

Optics: Leica Ultravid 10x42 binoculars and Leica Televid 82-mm APO with 25-50x eyepiece

Photos or audio recordings: none

Accompanying observers: none

Documentation date: report coalesced on 9/1/11 from brief notes taken shortly after the sighting 8/28/11

Submission date: 1 September 2011

Observation: During the passage of Hurricane Irene, I spent about six hours (~9:00am to ~3:00pm) at the lake at Nockamixon State Park, mostly at the fishing pier on the west side of the lake. At around 1:30pm, with a strong W or WNW wind, I spotted a large white tern with an obvious white forehead passing quickly along the lake from my right to my left along or near the opposite side of the lake from the pier, maybe to within 500 feet of my position at closest approach. It was moving generally with the wind at its back; basically, moving eastward. After initially picking it up with binoculars, I quickly turned my scope onto the bird and had a very good but brief look at the bird in flight. When I first had it in the scope, it was just barely past parallel to my position, and was moving quickly to the left and away. When it was well to my left, it passed over the trees on the opposite side of the lake and was not seen again. All told it was in good enough scope view for study for perhaps 10 to 15 seconds, followed by a short amount of time during which it simply appeared as a white bird flying more or less away from my position.

Description and Discussion: The sighting was brief but compelling. When I first picked up the bird in binoculars I was immediately struck by its apparently clean white forehead and black "crown". It was larger than any of the medium-sized terns, e.g., Common, Forster's, or Arctic, and more the approximate size of a Caspian Tern. I also noticed that the bird did not seem as stocky as a Caspian, rather more sleek and streamlined, and it had what appeared to be more extensively white underwings compared to Caspian. Its upperside was clean white/gray, indicating the bird was not a juvenile. Considering the speed with which the bird was moving, its distance from my position, and the cloudy/dark conditions, I could not take

particular note of the shape and size of the bill, nor its exact shade. It simply seemed large (relatively speaking as compared to, say, Common Tern) and orange.

I feel quite comfortable that the bird was not a Caspian Tern. The forehead was too clean white even for a basic-plumaged Caspian, much less for a typical adult Caspian in August. An abnormally white Caspian was further ruled out by this bird's whiter underwings and generally more slender appearance compared to the broader-winged Caspian. The orange bill and forehead also ruled the other medium terns, e.g. Sandwich, Gull-billed.

I do have to admit, however, that Elegant Tern is perhaps not sufficiently ruled out by my observation, especially considering the fleeting look I had at the bird's bill and the overall brevity of the encounter. Certainly Royal is considerably more likely in Pennsylvania than Elegant during an Atlantic hurricane event, especially in the context of so many other reports of Royal Terns pushed inland throughout Pennsylvania and nearby states during Irene's passage. I certainly feel comfortable enough about the circumstance and sighting to list it in my personal records (and, ultimately, to vote for it as a member of the committee), but also understand that as described it may not pass muster for the official record.

Prior experience: Many thousands of Royal Terns seen in coastal areas of eastern North America over many years. First sighting in Pennsylvania. I have more limited but still fairly extensive experience with Elegant Tern in western North America.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Royal Tern Sterna maxima

Date of Sighting: 28 August 2011 to 28 August 2011

County : BUCKS

Location : NOCKAMIXON STATE PARK

Observer(s): Geoff Malosh

Date of Submission: 2011

Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

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	
D. DeReamus			X					
A. Guarente			X					
T. Johnson			X					
B. Coulter			X					
R. Koury			X					
D. Weber			X					
G. Malosh			X					
TOTALS			7					
DECISION			X					

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary) Nick Pulcinella

Date: 4/8/12