

BRIDLED TERN SIGHTING OFF GLOUCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

by Walter G. Ellison, White River Junction, Vermont

Date: August 25, 1984.

Observer making report: Walter G. Ellison.

Other observers: Nancy L. Martin, Donna J. P. Crossman, and Glen Wood.

Number observed: one.

Habitat: Open ocean. Dark, rusty-brown bands of krill were visible in the waters of the area.

Observing conditions:

Sky cover - less than 10 percent.

Visibility - 70-80 kilometers (40-50 miles).

Wind - northeast at 8-13 km/hr (5-8 mph).

Temperature - about 25° C.

Sea conditions - seas running at 1.0-1.7 meters (3-5 ft.).

Location: 7 miles due east of Gloucester, Essex County.

Time: twelve noon.

Length of observation: about 2 minutes.

Distance from bird: minimum of 10 meters.

Optics used: 9 x 35 Bausch & Lomb Zephyr Binoculars.

Previous acquaintance with species: none.

Identification and behavior. I was on the whale watch vessel *Cetacea* in the capacity of bird leader for the chartering organization, the Vermont Institute of Natural Science of Woodstock, Vermont. We had come from Newburyport via the Annisquam River and Gloucester Harbor. At approximately 11:45-11:50 A.M. we began encountering pelagic birds including our first Greater Shearwater and a few Wilson's Storm-Petrels. A large number of Common Terns were also present in the area including a flock that had settled on the water. At about 11:55 a Leach's Storm-Petrel was observed flying right to left well off the bow. The craft was headed toward a group of three Humpback and two or three Finback whales when two terns appeared about a hundred meters off to starboard. The upper bird was an adult Common Tern; the lower bird was distinct from any tern I had previously seen. As the bird approached, I could clearly see that it had a much darker mantle and wings than the Common Tern flying above it. In general, it was roughly similar in shape to the Common Tern with long wings and a deeply forked tail, which it was holding in a folded position. Differences in shape and flight compared to the Common Tern included slightly larger size, broader wings, a longer bill, and a shallower, less choppy wingbeat. The bird possessed a black cap down to the forehead, sides of its face, and upper nape. There was a black line through the eye, and the forehead (lores and front) was white. The lower face, throat, nape, and underparts were white. The white on the nape separated the brown of the mantle from the black of the crown, appearing as a collar. The mantle was dark grayish-brown, ranging in tone from Smithe's colors 45 (smoke gray) to 28 (olive brown); Nancy Martin

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mouth Annisquam R., Annisquam, Mar

0900 hrs.



seemed large
slightly smaller than
Kb Gull, artifact of
bird of reference
blackish
very dark
capal.

det. Juv.

Bonaparte's

1200 hrs. 7 mi. due E. Claxston hbr.

broader wings than Com Tern flying

above, shallower
slower wing beat

dark cap
whitenape

slightly
larger than
Com. Tern

flying above

ca. 10m w/ com. Tern, duration observation 2 mins.



darkish
blackish
edge

passed boat at dist. 3

Weather: brisk NE winds, 5-8 mph

3-5 seas, clear, no haze vis. 40 miles

NE m - dark, sooty back, wings, tail
lighter in coverts

large amount of white on head
black around eye +
back to crown

long tail, folded



(flying away view)

FIELD NOTES MADE AT BRIDLED TERN SIGHTING AUGUST 25, 1984

Page from notebook of Walter G. Ellison

from her perspective on the deck - I was on the bridge - found the color nearer gray, Smithe's 80 (glaucous). The wing coverts were similar in color, but the flight feathers were more blackish; the leading edge of the coverts was whitish. From my position, the tail appeared largely white with some dark coloration although I could not be sure where. On deck, Nancy Martin perceived the tail as being largely dark. The bill was black. The birds passed by on a westward heading off the starboard. The bird did not vary its course nor did it call.

Similar species. Dark-backed terns that occur in the North Atlantic include Black, White-winged, Sooty, and Bridled terns and the Brown Noddy. Noddys are uniformly dark and are easily eliminated from consideration. Black and White-winged terns have only shallowly notched tails, incomplete caps, and paler mantles in non-breeding plumages. The Sooty Tern is similar in pattern and presents more problems. However, the bird in question was seen at close range; the back and wing coloration was clearly more brown than black; and the white collar characteristic of the Bridled Tern was seen well. I have no doubt as to our bird's identity.

Additional comments. The bird appeared to be an adult in breeding plumage. It is interesting to note the occurrence of the normally deep-water Leach's Storm-Petrel with this bird. Abundant krill in the water led to relatively large numbers of whales and seabirds feeding in this area. Scott Mercer, the marine mammalogist of New England Whale Watch, informed me that he had never seen krill in the Gulf of Maine. Other birds seen during the trip were 110 Greater Shearwaters, 30 Sooty Shearwaters, 5 Manx Shearwaters, 20 Wilson's Storm-Petrels, an adult Parasitic Jaeger in non-breeding plumage, and an adult Black-legged Kittiwake in worn breeding plumage. Most of the shearwaters were resting on the water and were so full of food they had difficulty rising off the water.

The report above was written from notes taken directly after the observation. (See the accompanying figure printed from the page in the author's notebook.)

WALTER G. ELLISON, a Vermonter since birth, has worked for the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) as a birding guide as well as contributing both field work and writing to the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Vermont, to be published in 1985. He plans soon to enter graduate school to continue his career in ornithology. Walter has authored A Guide to Bird-Finding in Vermont, available (as is the breeding bird atlas) from VINS, Church Hill Road, Woodstock, Vermont, 05091.



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