

## AT A GLANCE

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August 2002




WAYNE R. PETERSEN

Ah, yet another seabird! As the hurricane season is upon us, it seems only appropriate to focus on a bird species that frequently accompanies such tropical storms, or else falls victim to them. Indeed, among the species most regularly transported northward by severe tropical weather systems are terns and Black Skimmers. With this in mind, a quick look at the mystery bird's slender, pointed bill should at once suggest that the bird is a tern of some sort. Since the bird is obviously very dark above, a jaeger might also seem like a possibility. A jaeger, however, would possess a thicker, slightly hooked bill, show more dusky coloration on the underparts (e.g., a collar across the chest), exhibit dark or mottled underwings (not pure white), and would undoubtedly show a flash of white near the base of the primaries.

The fact that the tern in the picture displays snowy-white wing linings is an easy way to eliminate Black Tern as an identification candidate, despite the dark appearance of the upperwings. Not only do Black Terns have gray underwings in all plumages, they also display a dark spot on the neck just in front of the wing when they are in complete nonbreeding plumage. Nonbreeding plumage is the only plumage in which a Black Tern would be more or less pure white on the underparts.

Armed with the knowledge that the mystery bird is neither a jaeger nor a Black Tern, the field is narrowed considerably. Since most tern species are gray or white above, the only remaining identification possibilities are the dark-backed Sooty Tern

and Bridled Tern, both of which possess striking white wing linings. A careful examination of the underwing pattern of the pictured tern reveals completely dark primaries, in stark contrast with the white wing linings. Furthermore, the white forehead of the bird in the photograph appears to barely reach the eye. Taken together, these features indicate that the bird is an adult Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*). The quite similar Bridled Tern would display more extensive white on the underside of the primaries, not a sharp contrast between the primaries and wing linings, and the white on the forehead would penetrate much further back onto the forehead, extending well behind the eye. Although the presence of a pale collar (a characteristic of the Bridled Tern) is suggested by the photograph, it is the angle of the picture that gives this effect. The underwing features, facial pattern, and the extremely long, black bill serve to conclusively identify the bird as a Sooty Tern.

Sooty Terns are most often found in Massachusetts on Cape Cod and the Islands following hurricanes in late summer and fall. There are also a number of inland occurrences, particularly when the eye of a tropical storm passes over land. The author photographed the pictured Sooty Tern in the Dry Tortugas in Florida. 

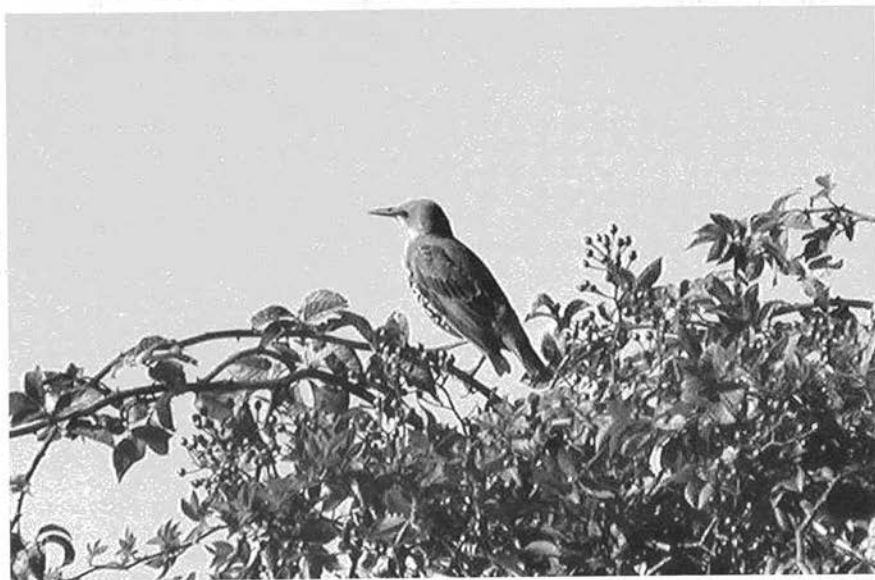
Wayne R. Petersen

### News from MassWildlife

Preliminary Tern and Piping Plover nesting results – MassWildlife has compiled preliminary figures for nesting terns and Piping Plovers with data gathered through the cooperation of nearly seventy biologists and beach managers from state and federal agencies, private conservation groups, and local municipalities. Common Tern numbers were down 5% to 13,608 pairs, with poor productivity at key sites due to mass starvation of chicks and predation on adults, chicks, or eggs by Great Horned Owls, Black-Crowned Night Herons and Canada Geese. Roseate Terns dropped 14% to 1460 pairs, likely due to disruption and nest abandonment caused by Great Horned Owls. Least Terns decreased by 18% to 2789 pairs. The largest colony, located at Kalmus Beach in Barnstable, was devastated by gull and fox predation with only 4 pairs of Least Terns nesting in contrast to 599 pairs there in 2001. A trace number of Arctic Terns continue to nest in Massachusetts with 5 pairs documented. Piping Plovers fared somewhat better than terns, increasing by 7% over 2001 totals at an estimated 530 breeding pairs. Plovers nested at 106 beaches in the Commonwealth and produced an average of 1.1 chicks per pair, a rate considered too low to sustain the population. As with terns, predators took many plover eggs and chicks while additional nests were lost to storm-driven high tides in May and June. Beach management practices to safeguard beach-nesting birds from human related disturbance, mortality and habitat degradation caused by off-road vehicles remain effective conservation tools. Piping Plovers are classified as “threatened” on both the federal and state endangered species lists.

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PAUL KINNALLY

Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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