

## NOTES

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**NESTING OF SOOTY TERNS (*Onychoprion fuscatus*)  
IN THE EASTERN PANHANDLE OF FLORIDA**

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In 2007 and 2008, a pair of Sooty Terns (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) nested on the St. George Island causeway, Franklin County, Florida. These occurrences are the second and third breeding records of this species for the county.

The Sooty Tern is a widespread species of tropical oceans. The only large breeding colony (25,000-40,000 pairs) in Florida is on Bush Key at Dry Tortugas National Park, Monroe County (Robertson and Robertson 1996), though historical records list isolated breeding at Key West (Monroe County), Tampa Bay (Hillsborough County), and Franklin County (AOU 1983). Extralimital breeding, while not uncommon, is frequently short-lived and involves a small number of pairs (Schreiber et al. 2002).

The causeway, located at 29°41' 44.91" N, 84°53' 7.88" W, is a sand-and-shell island constructed in 1965 as part of the Bryant Patton Bridge, which served as the thoroughfare between St. George Island and mainland Franklin County. In 2004 a new bridge was opened and with the removal of the old bridge spans the island became inaccessible except by watercraft. The causeway is 1.6 km long, with an area of approximately 20 ha (Pranty 2002), and about 2.1 km from the mainland. It is sparsely vegetated with various salt-tolerant grasses and forbs. It accommodates a number of breeding larids including Laughing Gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla*), Caspian (*Hydroprogne caspia*), Royal (*Thalasseus maximus*), Sandwich (*T. sandvicensis*), Gull-billed (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) and Least (*Sternula antillarum*) Terns; and Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*).

The staff of the Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve (ANERR) have conducted annual nesting bird surveys of the St. George Island causeway since 1985. The survey team is comprised of eight to ten members divided into two groups in order to canvass both sides of the island simultaneously. As surveyors walk abreast of one another, they record the number of nests of each species and the number of eggs and/or chicks in each nest. In the course of the 1 June 2007 survey, the team flushed a Sooty Tern from a nest containing a single chick (A. Knothe, pers. comm.). On 30 May 2008 the survey group, including JM, was in the general vicinity of the 2007 nest when we witnessed a Sooty Tern emerge from coarse vegetation about 35 cm high, and hover overhead. Soon we saw a second Sooty flying among the Laughing Gulls. Concentrating on the area where the first tern was noted, we eventually located its nest, which contained a single downy chick (Fig. 1). The nest was a shallow depression about 30 cm in diameter lined with dead grasses and small bits of oyster and other shell fragments. Because of the many gulls that might seize the unguarded chick, we left the nest site immediately after taking photographs. No other Sooty Terns were found. After moving away from the nest we looked back hoping to observe the terns returning to the nest, but the swirling mass of hundreds of gulls effectively obscured our view. To my knowledge, there were no subsequent sightings of Sooty Terns in the vicinity for the remainder of the breeding season.

In determining the terns' identities, we noted their relatively large size, about the size of a Sandwich Tern, and sharply contrasting black upperparts and all-white body below. The underwings showed a marked contrast between the solid dark primaries and



**Figure 1. Sooty Tern chick in nest, St. George Island causeway, Franklin County, Florida 30 May 2008. Photograph by Alan Knothe.**

the white coverts, and the tail had white restricted to the outermost rectrices. The white superciliary line extended posteriorly from the white forehead, not extending beyond the eye. These characters together with the lack of contrast between the black cap and the equally dark back and upper wings made it possible for us to exclude Bridled Tern (*O. anaethetus*) and conclusively identify the birds as Sooty Terns (Fig. 2).

The only other breeding record attributed to Franklin County is an egg collected on Dog Island by Louis Whitfield on 7 May 1892 (California Academy of Sciences #6354;



**Figure 2. Sooty Tern adult flying above nest with chick on St. George Island causeway, Franklin County, Florida 30 May 2008. Photograph by Alan Knothe.**

Stevenson and Anderson 1994). The current pair may have been remnants of those displaced during the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season when Hurricane Katrina hit the small Sooty Tern breeding colony on the Chandeleur Islands, Louisiana (Wiedenfeld and Swan 2000), as well as the large colony at Bush Key. The resulting destruction may have caused this pair to seek other suitable breeding grounds. With the Sooty Tern's fidelity to its prior years' breeding site (Schreiber et al. 2002), this pair may continue to use the causeway site so long as there is no significant habitat change, though such extralimital breeding attempts are seldom long-lived (Schreiber et al. 2002).

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