

FIRST INLAND SIGHTING OF GULL-BILLED TERN IN MISSISSIPPI

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and

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On 16 July 1989 we found a Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*) in Lowndes County, Mississippi. At 0735 Schiefer spotted the bird as it flew by us; we were birding flooded fields of the Catalpa Creek floodplain along U.S. highway 82. We watched the bird intermittently for 15 minutes as it hawked for food over the fields. It was seen from as close as 10 m, from all sun angles, through 10X and 7 X binoculars and 22X and 25X spotting scopes. The tern was seen in both dark overcast and bright sunlight, although the sky was mostly cloudy. Strong winds were from the south and the temperature was about 75 degrees F.

We identified the medium- to large-sized tern almost immediately as a Gull-billed. The bird was white but for the mantle, wings, crown, and soft parts. The mantle and upperwings were a very pale gray except for a slight darkness on the outer primaries. This latter color may have been an impression caused by dark on the under surface showing through the wing. A dark gray bar on the trailing edge of the underwing tip was about 1 cm wide and on the outer primaries only. Schiefer noted a narrow dark strip on the leading edge of the outer primary tip. The wings were broad; tail short, deeply notched, and outer rectrices not elongated into streamers. The tail only extended beyond the feet about 2-3 lengths of the feet.

The deep black cap was immaculate and extended from the front over the eyes to the bottom of the nape. The bill was short for the tern's size, stout, and entirely black. The legs, feet, and eyes were also black.

The tern flew languidly over flooded fields, hawking (not diving for) insects with slow, shallow wingbeats. It usually flew at a height of about 10-15 m above ground, except when it flew low for prey. It successfully captured at least two prey items as we watched. It usually kept its head facing down while flying. The tern landed on mudflats as we were leaving. We could not relocate the bird later the same day.

Gull-billed Terns are very rare inland in the U.S. Of the four states bordering Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama have inland

records of this species. The inland (*sensu lato*) Louisiana Gull-billed Tern was seen in the Baton Rouge area on 10 September 1965 (Lowery 1974). Farther inland was one at Marion, Alabama, on 17 May 1969 (Imhof 1976). Several Gull-billed Terns have been recorded inland in Texas (Oberholser 1974), and there is a record for Eufala National Wildlife Refuge, Georgia (LeGrand 1978). The present sighting is the first inland record for Mississippi.

Literature Cited

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