

A Case of Misidentification and Comments on the Value ofPhotographic Records

Jerome A. Jackson

Department of Biological Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762

Dwight Cooley, Bette Schardien, and I recently reported on our observations of Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) which we had observed on Horn Island, Mississippi (Jackson et al., Mississippi Kite 8(2):42, 1978). Our report was based first of all on our observation of at least three Sooty Terns seen flying near the south shore of the island. These birds were observed for some time and carefully compared to field guide illustrations. Cooley and Schardien had previously seen the species. I had never seen Sooty Terns before. Later the same day I found a strange tern sitting on the beach and immediately assumed it was a Sooty Tern. I photographed the bird and this photo was used to illustrate our article. None of us questioned the identity of the photographed bird. I failed to compare the photograph with field guide illustrations and my students accepted my "authority." As it turns out, the identity of the photographed bird is very questionable. The photo has been examined by a number of authorities at the U.S. National Museum, the University of South Florida, and elsewhere, and most feel strongly that the bird was a Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*). Still there is some doubt about the bird's identity - and this doubt is shared by a few of those examining the photo. While the overall impression from the photograph is that of a typical winter plumage Black Tern, the colored slide from which the black-and-white print was made clearly shows a much darker bird than a typical winter Black Tern (Fig. 1). Furthermore, I was able to approach to within a meter of the bird before it flew and I was confident at the time that this bird was much larger than a Black Tern. The odds nonetheless favor the notion that the bird was a Black Tern - in which case it represents a late record for Mississippi (14 October 1978). While the issue may be settled for some, there will always be a question in my mind concerning the bird's identity. In spite of having an excellent photograph to examine, this record of either a Sooty or a Black tern will forever remain clouded. Herein lies the remainder of my tale and a lesson for all.

Ironically the Sooty Tern article was followed by an essay I wrote (Mississippi Kite 8(2):43-47) titled: "What constitutes a valid rare bird record?" In the article I stated "Specimens and good photographs are nearly of equal acceptability. Good sound recordings may rank next." Clearly the dilemma of the mystery tern refutes the equality of specimen and photographic records. In some cases there is clearly no substitute for a specimen. It is difficult and often impossible to measure the size of a bird from a photograph and light conditions can distort the "true"

color and pattern of a bird. Photographic records - or sound recordings - of course stand out above sight records and may be adequate documentation, but their value to science will vary with circumstance and species. The superior value of a specimen is clear, though I do not advocate the collection of birds that are rare or unusual in an area just to document their occurrence.

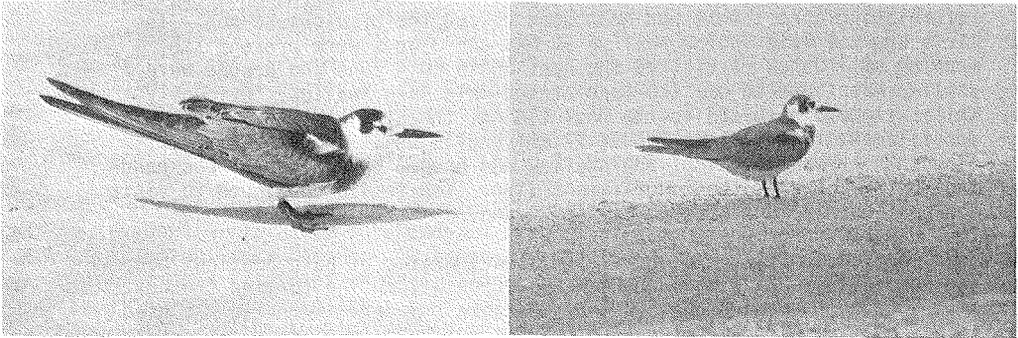


Figure 1. (Left) Tern photographed on Horn Island 14 October 1978 (from Mississippi Kite 8(2):42). (Right) Black Tern photographed on Horn Island on 8 July 1979.

The subject of this article and the two articles mentioned above has been the establishment of valid rare bird records. I have not discussed the many uses to which specimens are put nor the needs of scientists for large series of specimens. Specimen collections have contributed and will continue to contribute significantly to ornithological knowledge.