

Bridled Tern: First Observation of a Live Bird in Mississippi

Larry Gates and Terrie Fairley

2911 Mamie Street and Route 8, Box 71
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39401

In the early morning hours of 13 September 1979 the western edge of Hurricane Frederic passed through Hattiesburg, Mississippi with wind gusts as strong as ninety miles per hour. The hurricane left in its wake up-rooted trees, downed power lines and several species of birds which are not normally seen away from the coast. (Hattiesburg is seventy miles inland.)

At 08:00 Gates discovered a flock of fourteen Royal Terns (Thalasseus maximus) flying over one of the four large sewage lagoons which lie adjacent to the Leaf River within the city limits of Hattiesburg. The sky was overcast at that time and the wind was gusting out of the north enough that the tripod being used to support the 20x telescope through which the birds were being observed had to be held to prevent it from blowing over. At 08:05 a smaller and more graceful tern soared through the flock. From the considerable distance from which it was being observed it appeared to be black above and white beneath. It tended to fly lower over the water than other terns which we have seen in Mississippi. It also seemed to soar more and flap less. The bird gradually came closer and at about 08:15 flew to within 40 feet of Gates who identified it as a Bridled Tern (Sterna anaethetus). Until the bird came close it was believed to be a Sooty Tern (Sterna fuscata). From 40 feet it was obvious that the bird had a white nape behind the black cap and a dark gray rather than black back. From this range it was also apparent that the bird had silvery white outer tail feathers on a deeply forked tail. After passing by the observer the bird suddenly came down and landed just out of sight on the edge of a dam between two sewage ponds. Gates drove to the spot where the bird had disappeared and approached the place where the bird was believed to be with a camera and a pair of 7x35 binoculars. The bird was suddenly seen only 15 feet away. Certain identification was possible at this time even without binoculars. The bird had a black bill and a thin black line through the eye which joined the black cap at a point well behind the eye. The bird had a white forehead and a white area between the cap and the eye line. Unfortunately, the bird jumped into the air as the camera was being focused, but two quick pictures were taken of the bird in flight before it flew off and out of sight. The pictures, though blurry, show the white area that extends to behind the top of the eye, the white nape and the underwing pattern (Fig. 1). From beneath the wings were white with a well-defined black band of uniform width along the trailing edge. Fairley arrived at the lagoons at about 08:40 and the Bridled Tern was nowhere in sight. She and LG drove around each of the ponds looking for it for about an hour before re-locating it. During this hour we saw three Sandwich

Terns (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*), a Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and a Sanderling (*Crocethia alba*) all of which are quite unusual away from the coast. The Bridled Tern was seen again at about 09:40 and studied through 7x35 binoculars and a 20x telescope for about ten minutes. During this time Fairley was able to see the major field identification marks including the white collar which separated the black cap from the dark gray back. She concurred in the identification of the bird as a Bridled Tern. For a time the Bridled Tern was seen flying with Sandwich Terns and Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*). The Bridled Tern was smaller than the Sandwich Terns and close in size to the Forster's Terns, though a little larger. The bird was searched for in the late morning and afternoon by several other observers, but it was never seen again. A Black Skimmer (*Rynchops nigra*) showed up in the afternoon as did several Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*). Eight species of terns were seen on 13 and 14 September.

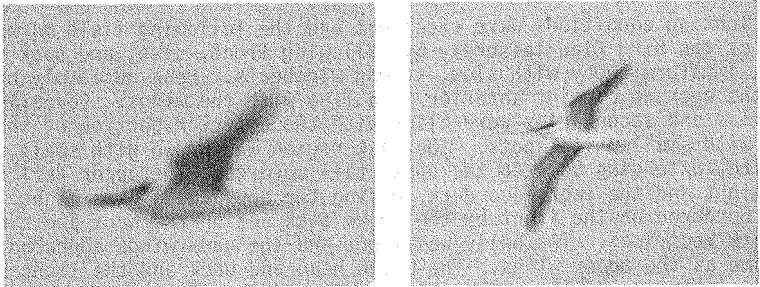


Figure 1. A Bridled Tern at Hattiesburg. Photos by Larry Gates.

Bridled Terns have been recorded once in Alabama (Imhof 1976) and twice in Louisiana (Lowery 1974). Only one of the Louisiana records involved a live bird. In May 1979 a badly decomposed tern, which was eventually identified as a Bridled Tern, was found on the beach at Gulfport, Mississippi. We know of no other Mississippi records of this species.

Literature Cited

- Imhof, T.A. 1976. Alabama Birds. 2nd ed. University of Alabama Press, University.
 Lowery, G.H. Jr. 1974. Louisiana Birds. 3rd ed. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge.