

Sooty Tern: a Potential First Ohio Record

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From 13-19 July 2005, East Fork Lake in southwestern Ohio's Clermont County played host to an adult sooty tern *Sterna fuscata*. This pelagic species, if accepted by the Ohio Bird Records Committee, would be a first state record.*

As local weather forecasts called for remnants of Hurricane Dennis to pass to our west and then eventually drift eastward, stalling out over southwestern Ohio, I began to keep track of this storm's movement in hopes it might deposit some rare birds in the area. I also checked internet birding lists for states where the eye of the hurricane had either passed or was currently dominating the weather. I noticed sooty terns were being discovered at reservoirs and rivers in the states previously crossed by the eye as well as on the eastern (inflowing, with southern winds) side of Dennis. As the hurricane's eye began moving closer to southwestern Ohio, I began regularly checking the Ohio River and the only large reservoir close to me, East Fork Lake.

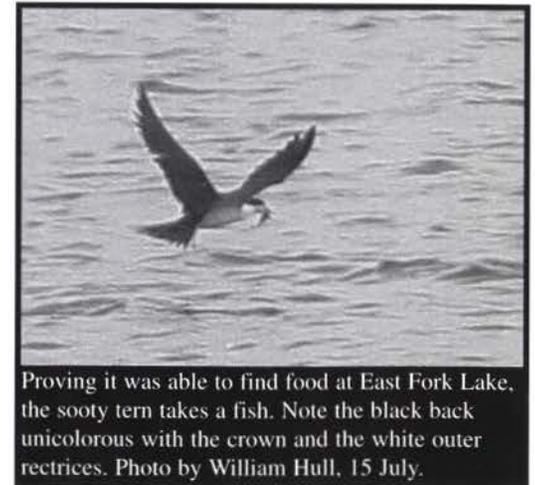
On 12 July, I spotted an adult sooty tern flying west down the Ohio River near New Richmond, in southern Clermont County. However, since most of the river actually lies within the Kentucky state line, the bird did not qualify as an Ohio record. Optimistic that there might be more sooty terns in the area, the next day I decided to venture out to check the reservoir at East Fork State Park periodically to search for any oddities that may have fallen out. When I checked the weather radars before departing, it was apparent that the remnants of the eyewall were over southwestern Ohio. On the afternoon of 13 July, while scanning the sky above the lake with my binoculars, a bird stood out from the numerous ring-billed gulls and turkey vultures circling above. I decided to keep watch on the bird; this proved very difficult as it at times soared out of sight.

While observing the bird over approximately ten minutes, I saw it make a spiraling dive, swooping down and just brushing the surface of the lake with its bill. It did not dive into the water like many of the terns I was familiar with. I quickly noted the shape and size of the bird, which appeared large for a local tern. The flight was very powerful and direct, again unlike most species of terns with which I was familiar. The bird's dark upperparts, whitish underparts, size, and overall jizz all led me to the conclusion it was definitely one of the two species of pelagic dark-backed terns.

I continued to observe the tern through my scope, looking for and recording field marks that could be used to distinguish whether I was observing a sooty or bridled tern. The bird lacked the white collar of the bridled tern between the black cap on the top of the head and the dark back. The dark primaries contrasting with the white underwing coverts made the wings appear to flash, constantly catching my eye. As the tern worked its way closer to the beach where I was standing, it appeared to feed. This opportunity allowed me to get a very good look at the tail while fanned out. I was able to make out very narrow white outer edges to the forked tail, set off by very dark central tail feathers. Adding it all up, I realized that I could be looking at Ohio's first record of sooty tern.

Fearing the bird would not stay long enough for others to observe it, I quickly had my friend Jaime, who was with me at the time, return home to report the sighting on the internet. I stayed behind to observe the tern, gathering details that could be used for documentation. Unsuccessful at obtaining photographs with my digital camera, I was hoping for the bird to stay long enough for other birders to get a chance at seeing it. As I was leaving the park, I met up with Bob Foppe. I supplied him with the details on the tern, and he was able to relocate it and point it out to other observers arriving at the park. Over the next six days, many birders were able to study and enjoy the tern, and documentary photographs were obtained.

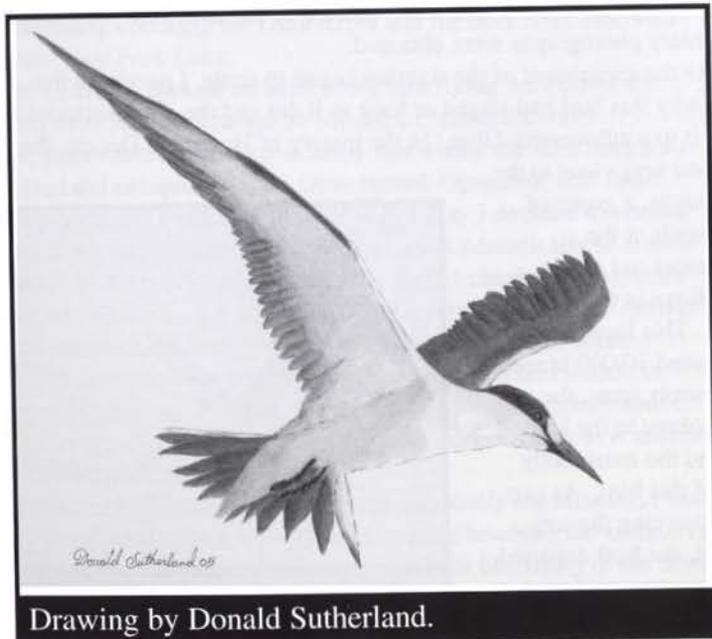
As the excitement of the sighting began to settle, I pondered the reasons why this bird had stayed as long as it did and the circumstances that brought it to southwestern Ohio. In the history of Hurricane Dennis, the eye passed very close to the Dry Tortugas, a group of small islands at the westernmost end of the Florida Keys in the Gulf of Mexico. This location hosts an estimated 20,000 breeding pairs of sooty terns, the largest colony in the United States and the most likely source of this bird. As one birder observing the tern predicted, the bird departed as the low pressure presence that remained from Hurricane Dennis had been pushed out of the area by a cold front.



Proving it was able to find food at East Fork Lake, the sooty tern takes a fish. Note the black back unicolorous with the crown and the white outer rectrices. Photo by William Hull. 15 July.

*There has previously been only one recorded report of a potential sooty tern for Ohio, in 1945. Bill Whan has provided me with the following information regarding that report and records from surrounding states:

“On 5 August 1945, several observers reported having observed a tern on Mogadore Reservoir in Portage Co. The bird was studied for an hour with scopes and binoculars, and a report published in Audubon magazine 47(5):48, where Ludlow Griscom remarked that it left “no room for reasonable doubt” that it was “one of the two tropical oceanic dark-backed terns” [i.e., sooty or bridled]. Ohio authorities, however, have been unable to locate the documentation, and while this bird was quite possibly a sooty tern, it might have been a bridled tern, and in any event better evidence would probably be required for a first state record. No hurricane is likely to have affected Ohio significantly on this date, according to Weather Service records. All adjacent states and provinces except Michigan already have records of this species; Indiana’s sole record is of a dead bird, while Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ontario, and Kentucky have multiple records.”



Drawing by Donald Sutherland.

How Common are Wintering Long-eared Owls in Ohio?

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How can we know if a bird species is genuinely rare, or just rarely seen? Ohio seems to lie in known migratory pathways for yellow rails and Le Conte’s sparrows, birds much sought after here, but we don’t have the faintest idea how many pass through the state. We benefit from many ways of estimating birds’ numbers: surveys, counts, and censuses, hawk-watches, reports from banding stations, and data from an army of other observers collected, compiled, and recorded in any number of other ways, including in this journal, but they only scratch the surface, and the local abundances of many secretive species are unknown. Near the top of anyone’s list of such birds are the owls, and among regularly-occurring Ohio ones the most difficult to detect are long-eared owls *Otus asio*.

Peterjohn & Rice (1991) estimated their statewide population in summer as “probably fewer than five pairs” if the very few nesters found during the *Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* period accurately reflected their status, but noted that their true numbers could be larger. Many more are noticed in winter, when an influx of birds from the north presumably occupies the state. Peterjohn (2001) calls them “casual to rare and very locally distributed winter residents throughout Ohio,” but Wheaton (1882), writing when the deforestation of the state was more extensive than it is today, found it “at times [an] abundant visitor,” though he too called it “rare in summer.” Trautman (in preparation) reports finding 1-16 birds daily during many consecutive winters in a single stand of cedars in Ottawa County; while fewer were present in other seasons, he nevertheless regarded the long-eared owl as “an uncommon migrant and rather uncommon nesting species” in the western Lake Erie region since 1930. Published Ohio records of the long-eared owl involve 62 counties, the great majority of them coming from the northern third of the state December through March. Many forested counties in the unglaciated southeast lack records from any time of year. Setting aside breeding records, there are among more than 600 records only nine from October, fewer than 30 from November, and not many more than that from April. Studies near our latitude indicate northbound movements from mid-March to mid-April, and southbound in October and November, with 90% of birds moving between 16 October and 24 November at Cape May, N.J. (Marks et al. 1994). While most authorities agree in regarding it as a rare nester in Ohio, details are often difficult to come by. In the modern era the hobby of egg collecting, which often led collectors to seek out nests of rare