

ACCEPTED 7-0  
(FIRST STATE RECORD) PHOTOS

CFO-ORC FILE # \_\_\_\_\_  
COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

NEW STATE RECORD ☒ UNUSUAL RECORD ☐

Please print or type. Attach photographs and additional pages if necessary.

Species: Royal Tern

Sterna maxima

(Scientific name)

Date(s): 15 and 16 July, 1997

Number of birds seen: one  
postbreeding (winter or basic)

Sex: unknown Plumage: adult,

Locality: Neenoshe Reservoir, Kiowa County Elevation: 3800 feet

Nearest town: Eads

County: Kiowa

Time(s) observed:

Early afternoon and early evening on 15 July, morning on 16 July.

Duration of observation:

I found the bird while conducting a fledgling count of juvenile Least Terns from a canoe. I spent one hour (between approximately 1 and 2 p.m.) photographing, observing, and making it fly to observe wing patterns. I returned later that evening with Dick Schottler, and we observed it from land from about 7 p.m. to dusk. We returned on the morning of 16 July, and watched it from approximately 8 to 9 a.m.

Others who saw the bird with you (names and addresses):

Dick Schottler 25 S. Indiana Place, Golden, CO 80401

Others who saw the bird independently:

Mark Janos, Brandon Percival, Bob Dickson, Norm Erthal, Dan Bridges.

Light conditions in relationship to bird:

Optimal. I saw it in good light conditions with clear skies and afternoon, evening and morning sunlight.

Optical equipment used:

Bausch and Lomb 10X40 Custom Binoculars and through camera with 400 mm lens (from canoe) and binoculars and 15X45 power Bausch and Lomb Elite spotting scope.

If photographed, type of equipment and film:

Pentax K-1000 camera with Sigma 5.6 APO 400 mm lens. Film was Kodachrome 64 slide film.

Who else photographed the bird?

Not photographed by other observers.

Describe the bird's behavior.

When I found it, it was standing in shallow water just off a sandy point on the south side of the reservoir, loosely roosting with shorebirds including Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews, other smaller shorebirds, and Forster's Terns.

Describe in detail the bird's relative size, overall shape, plumage and color pattern. Include details of bill, wing and tail shape. Give particular emphasis to marks you used to identify the bird. Reference to its resemblance to field guide descriptions and illustrations is not enough. Describe only what you actually saw in the field.

The first thing I noticed was the large size. It was comparable in size to a Ring-billed Gull. Oddly, my first impression was that it was slightly smaller than a Caspian Tern, which to my mind's eye is the size of a California Gull. The bulk of the body was similar to a Marbled Godwit (see photographs). It towered over the nearby Forster's Terns.

Next, I noticed the bill color. The bill was yellow-orange, more on the yellow end of that spectrum. The bill was stout and long, but not nearly as stout as on Caspian Terns (which are regular transients in southeast Colorado). Since the bill contained no reddish tones and was thinner, I was certain that this was not an aberrant Caspian Tern right away. Likewise, immature Terns usually have dark bills, so I was certain that it was an adult bird.

The mantle was a very pale gray, similar in tone to Caspian Terns, and paler than in the smaller Forster's/Common Tern complex. The wings showed a lot of dark color on the folded primaries. On the sitting bird, the wings extended beyond the tail.

The legs were black (see photographs).

The most striking feature of the bird was the head pattern. At all angles, it showed a white forehead, extending to well behind the eyes. Behind the eye, there was a narrow black crest, terminating in a shaggy crest at the level of the eyes and bill. Immature terns lack this shaggy crest, and this identified this bird as an adult.

Immediately behind the eye, there was a break in the black crest, where a narrow area white interrupted the rest of the crest.

I felt I had to make this bird fly and observe the patterns on the upperwing and underwing surfaces, not only to confirm identification, but to see all the field marks of the bird. When I flushed it, the first impression was the huge appearance in flight, because the wings were extremely long and broad-based. The wing pattern was pronounced. There was a black wedge on the subterminal primary feathers that formed black triangles on the upper surface of the wings. The pattern was nearly identical to the upper wing pattern on an adult Common Tern.

Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery, (i.e. from perch, in flight, duration):

This bird was silent.



Describe the general and specific habitat in which you observed the bird:

A sandspit at the end of a peninsula on a huge prairie reservoir, and over the water when flying.

How did you eliminate similarly appearing species?

1. Caspian Tern. By subtly smaller size, different bill shape and structure. Caspian Terns never have a narrower, yellowish beak. Adult Caspian Terns never have a white forehead in any plumage. Caspian Terns also lack dark patches in the upper primaries in flight (or on the wingtips in standing birds).

2. Elegant Tern. This is the most problematic of all other Tern species worldwide, as far as separation from Royal Terns goes, and was my primary candidate for needing to eliminate. Much like the difference between Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, it is a more a matter of size and proportions than between plumages. Both have black legs, black wedges at the tips of the subterminal plumages, white foreheads and yellowish beaks.

It was not an Elegant Tern because:

a. Elegant Terns are much smaller than Caspian Terns, and would appear midway between the size of a Caspian and Forster's/Common Tern.

b. Elegant Terns have a much narrower bill, that appears to be decurved. The bill is not nearly as stout as shown in the photographs.

c. The black mask lacks the white interruption behind the eye (according to the National Geographic Guide).

3. Smaller North American Terns (by size, bill color and structure, forehead color in adult plumage, leg color, mantle color).

4. Other potential vagrants from outside North America. The combination of white forehead, yellow bill and black legs eliminates vagrants such as Large-billed Tern and all other large terns.

What is your prior experience with this and similarly appearing species? I have seen many Royal Terns in coastal Florida and Texas. I have seen Elegant Terns in offshore California. I see between 1 and 5 Caspian Terns most years in Colorado. I have seen every species of tern occurring in Colorado (with daily nesting/season experience monitoring Least Terns in my job as Least Tern/Piping Plover biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife).

List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc, consulted and how this influenced your identification:

a) at time of observation:

I had no field guides with me when I saw the bird the first time, and was not positive the bird was a Royal or Elegant Tern when I first saw it, and I knew that either bird was going to be a new first state record whatever it turned out to be. For that reason, I wanted to get the identification right, and I had to

spend as much time as possible studying the bird, comparing body sizes and plumage with nearby waterbirds. I knew that many other birders would scrutinize my identification when it was put on the Colorado Rare Bird Alert.

b) after observation: The only field Guide I had at my workstation in Hasty (a long one hour trip distant) was the National Geographic Guide to Birds of North America. I subsequently looked at every guide I could, including Peterson Guides and their spin-offs, The Golden Guide to North American Birds, Master Birders Guides, Audubon Guidebooks, and cosmopolitan Field Guides to various other parts of the world. The most inclusive Field Guide consulted was "Seabirds, an Identification Guide" by Peter Harrison.

This report was written from reports made during ( x ), after observation ( x ), from memory ( x ).

Date and time report was written: 17 January 1998

Reporting observer: Duane L. Nelson

Signature:

Address: 12 Fitzsimmons Road, Bailey, CO 80421

All reports will be maintained with the Curator of Zoology, Denver Museum of Natural History, Denver, CO 80205.



1997-42

PHOTOS

## COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

## ROYAL TERN

Sterna maximaLocation: Nee Noshe Reservoir; Eads; Kiowa County; ColoradoDate: July 16, 1997

This bird was discovered by Duane Nelson the previous day and was seen by him and Dick Schottler on the 15th. I made plans to meet with Brandon Percival the following morning, July 16th, at Nee Noshe Reservoir. We met at the point that projects into the southern part of the lake and waited and watched. After about 20 minutes the bird seemed to appear suddenly about 6:45 a.m. We observed the bird perched on the muddy beach with many other birds as well as in flight. Viewing time was nearly an hour before it flew out over the lake and disappeared in the distance about 7:35 a.m. We got excellent side-by-side views of this bird perched adjacent to Ring-billed and Franklin's gulls and Forster's Terns. I observed it at distances as close as 200 yards, in my binoculars and my Kowa 20-60x TSN-4 scope. The light was excellent and from a low angle. The skies were clear.

Description:

The bird was a non-breeding-plumaged adult. The length was about 20". It was about the same size as nearby Ring-billed Gulls; was slightly larger and bulkier, and about 4" longer, than nearby Franklin's Gulls; It was much longer and larger (about twice the bulk) as nearby Forster's Terns. The bird had a medium gray mantle and upper wing. Otherwise it was overall white. The head showed a black hind-cap and crest which was slightly shaggy on the nape. The black cap only extended forward to about the mid-crown. The forehead was white with black flecking. There was a black streak behind the eye, merging with the black cap. This black streak was separated from the eye by a thin white rear border between the eye and the streak. The bill was heavy, very slightly down-curved and quite thick. Unlike a gull bill, the bill tapered to a sharp point at the tip, and it had a slight gonydeal angle. The bill was colored pure yellowish-orange; it lacked a dusky or black tip. The eye was black against a white face. The face had a small amount of black flecking in front of the eye. The primaries were black in the folded wing, as they projected along the tail. The legs and feet were black. In flight the underside of the wing was gleaming white except for the trailing edges of the primaries which were dusky black.

Similar Species:

The black hind-cap, white and gray pattern, orange bill and black feet indicate a tern. The size alone indicate one of the larger Sterna terns; with the I.D. issue being basically between Royal, Caspian and Elegant Terns. The Caspian Tern has a larger, thicker and redder bill that is marked with a black tip. The black cap pattern of Caspian Tern is distinctly different than this bird, being more complete and darker on the forehead. Caspian Tern's eye is incorporated into the black cap, not separate from it. The underwing of Caspian Tern differs from this bird's as well, showing all dark primaries, not just dark-tipped primaries, from below. Caspian Tern would likely still be in breeding plumage at this time of year, while Royal Tern would not. Elegant Tern is probably closer in appearance to this bird, as it's overall wing pattern matches that of Royal Tern. However it shows a somewhat shaggier crest and a very distinctive bill. The Elegant Tern bill is very long, down-curved and thin, unlike this bird's bill. It also has the eye incorporated in the black cap, unlike this bird.

Experience with Species:

I have seen many Elegant, Royal and Caspian terns. I have seen several Caspian Terns in Colorado.

This report is prepared from notes and sketches made at the time of observation.

Mark Janos  
10 Sedum Ct.  
Pueblo, CO 81001



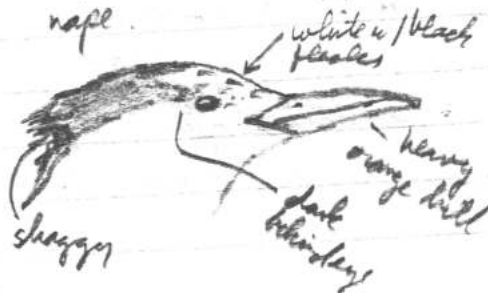
July 16, 1997  
Nee Noshe Res.

~6:45 am. - 7:35

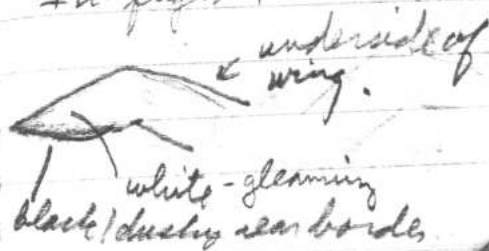
Excellent light; low, clear  
from @, ~200 yds.

\*Royal Tern - 1 n.b. ad. (S)

~20" long. Med. gray  
mantle & wing. White  
otherwise. Black hind-  
cap & crest; shaggy on  
nape.



Bill heavy; sl. down-curved;  
thick. Pure yellowish-  
orange. No black / no  
dusky tip. Black eye  
is in white face; w/  
small @ of black flecking  
in white face; dusky /  
dark behind eye.  
1's black in folded  
wing. Black legs & feet.  
In flight:





1997-42

MOUNTAIN BIRD SECTION  
AMERICAN BIRDSSpecies: ROYAL TERN  
(Vernacular name)Sterna maxima  
(Scientific name)

PHOTOS

rec'd 7.25.97 ✓  
If you watch birds solely for your own enjoyment, a written description of your observations is unnecessary. But, if you have seen something unusual, and would like to share this with others, a written description is essential. Compilers of regional bird lists must insist that their records be scientifically sound; future bird students--those studying occurrences 50 years from now--must have a written record on which to depend. By providing the verifying written description, you are employing a basic rule of the scientific method.

We recognize that experienced field observers can provide important and reliable records, if supported by an adequate verifying description. Thus this request is an effort to perpetuate your record by obtaining concrete evidence which may be permanently preserved for examination by others in the future. This procedure is required for every extraordinary observation, irrespective of the observer.

Date (s): 15 July 1997 1840 1930  
16 July 1997 Time Bird Seen: 1110 to 1150

Locality: south shore of Nee Noshe Reservoir, Kiowa Co., Colorado

Nearest town, county and state:

Optical equipment: Bushnell 10x40 binoculars; Bushnell scope (15x - 45X)

If photographed, please enclose copy. Equipment used: photographed by Duane Nelson

Number of birds seen: 1 Sex: ? Plumage: adult non-breeding

Light conditions: 7/15: clear sky, sun low in west  
7/16: clear sky, sun overhead

Distance from bird, and how measured: estimate less than 100 yds. to  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile

Describe the bird's overall behavior:

The tern was observed standing on the shore of the reservoir and flying over the reservoir. On 7/16, flight was predominantly close to the surface of the water with frequent dips to the surface as if picking up food.

Describe the habitat in which you observed the bird:  
large reservoir

Other observers who independently identified this bird (Please list name and address):

Duane Nelson ("discovered" the tern 7/15) (I don't know her current address.)

Mark Janos, 10 Sedum Ct., Pueblo 81001; Brandon Percival, 835 Harmony Dr., Pueblo West

Norm Erthal, 7761 Everett Way, Arvada 80005

81007

Describe in great detail the bird which you saw. Emphasize particularly the field marks used to identify the bird, but include a complete description of the bird. Include size, overall shape, plumage and color pattern; details on shape or size of bill, wings, and tail. (Reference to its resemblance to field guide descriptions is not enough.) Describe what you actually saw in the field.

This was a large tern, appearing as large or slightly larger than nearby Ring-billed Gull and much larger than nearby Forster's Terns, Black Terns, and Franklin's Gull. Outstanding features when first seen were the bill and the head feathering. The bill long, quite "heavy", and was bright orange from base to tip; a gonydeal angle, white present on the lower mandible, was not prominent. The head pattern was unique with a white forehead and a black bushy crest on the back of the head (see sketch). The black feathering appeared to extend forward to the dark eye. There appeared to be a transitional salt-and-pepper area on the top of the head. Neck and underparts were white and the mantle was pale gray. When standing, the wings extended beyond the tail, and the primaries appeared blackish. In flight, the underwings appeared mostly white with dark leading and trailing edges on the primaries. Upper wing surfaces were gray with dark primaries forming a blackish wedge at the wing tips. The tail was white and forked, but it was difficult to get an impression of the "depth" of the fork. Leg color was not observed.



Describe the bird's calls or sounds, if heard; including method of delivery-- i.e., from perch, in flight, etc.:

None heard

List similar species and how you eliminated them:

Caspian Tern (only "expected" large tern in Colo.): Has massive blood-red bill with a blackish area at or near the tip. It never has a white forehead in any plumage. In flight, the underside of the primaries is entirely blackish. It appears larger and stockier than Royal Tern.

Elegant Tern (most similar from ID standpoint): Bill is proportionally longer and much more slender, is yellow-orange, and usually appears decurved. It is a smaller, more slender built bird (admittedly difficult to judge without direct comparison). Retains a full black cap (including forehead) until late summer whereas Royal Tern has a full black cap very briefly only during courting.

Prior experience with this and similar species:

Royal Tern: Have seen many in AL, FL, SC, TX, and VA

Caspian Tern: Have seen many in AL, CA, CO, FL, MN, SC, TX, and VA.

Elegant Tern: Have seen in CA on several occasions.

This report was written from notes made during X after X observation; from memory       

NAME (print): Dick Schottler

Mailing address: 25 S. Indiana Pl., Golden, CO 80401

Signature: Dick Schottler 7/20/97

Return to:

Wash. D.C. Ring-billed  
2000 Wisconsin Street  
Denver, Colorado 80206



