

Rare Bird Report
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Least Tern, *Sterna antillarum*
June 4, 2004
Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters

This was the first bird I saw after getting out of the car at about 6:20 a.m. It was flying over the old observation pond just north of the HQ compound. It was very small and overall white, and from from the distance of the parking lot I certainly needed binoculars to tell what kind of bird it was in a general sense. It was clearly a tern from the long, narrow wings, black cap, long sharp bill, and buoyant flight, repeatedly dipping low over the water's surface, but never landing. From the size and shape, my first impression was indeed Least Tern, but I had to drop my ~~ll~~ binoculars to remind myself of it's relative size. It was clearly smaller than any other tern in the area, including Black and Forster's Tern. It had proportionately longer and narrower wings, and its tail was shorter than that of of Forster's Tern. Compared to these species, its wing beats were more regular, deeper, and seemed to have less an effect on the whole bird's movement. The bird seemed weightless.

The bird was overall white, with a slightly paler gray upper side to the wings and back. The leading edge of the primaries on the upper side had a very narrow but distinctive black edge. the cap was black, as in most terns, but the forehead was white, leading back into the supraloral area in a narrow wedge. The bill was bright yellow, but I did not see the ~~ll~~ black tip. I did not notice the leg color.

I watched the bird in flight at a distance of no closer than about 50 meters, with naked eye and with 8X34 Leica binoculars for about 1 minute. I also watched the bird for about 1 minute through a 32X Leica spotting scope at distances of about 75 meters to about 1/4 mile until it disappeared. The light was excellent, either from the side or behind, and the air was calm.

Other birders present who saw the bird were Alan Contreras, Justin Rodecap, Kent Rodecap, Sheran Wright, and Diane Pettey.

I have seen many Least Terns in Texas, Arizona, and Mexico. I am certain of the identification. This report was written from memory 14 hours after the sighting, without having referred to any field guide.1

Least Tern
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I have no photos. It was an extremely small sterna-style tern with a black cap and white forehead, yellow bill (I don't remember what the tip looked like) very deep bouncy wingbeats, darting back and forth over the display pond. Much smaller than the Forster's also present.

Someone else was there with us, I can't remember who.

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