

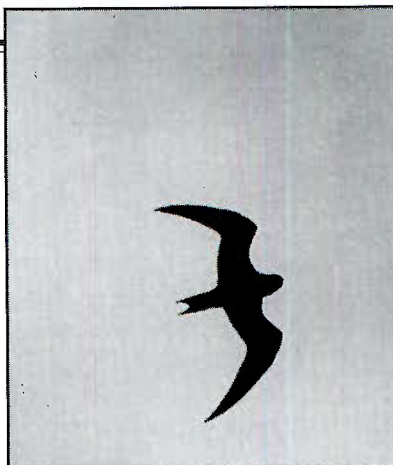
First State Record of Gull-billed Tern:

Waukegan Beach

By Eric Walters

On 30 May 1997, I sauntered out to the south end of Waukegan Beach in Lake County to try my luck at finding an Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*). This was my fourth attempt here in May for this particular species, but I felt this day was my best chance due to the late spring date and east winds which could push any potential rarities onto the beach. While scanning the gull and Common Tern (*S. hirundo*) flocks, my attention was quickly lost on a group of Forster's Terns (*S. forsteri*) on the beach. "This is a large flock for such a late date," I thought. So count them I did, focusing so strongly on the task at hand that when I came across a different looking tern, I passed it by, for fear of losing track of the count. About 15 seconds later, I thought, "Didn't that tern have an all black bill?" and "Didn't it seem really different?" I forgot my Forster's count and quickly turned back to this mystery tern, immediately noticing its black head, nape, bill, and legs. The bill looked strange, as if it were two bills. The bird's back was noticeably paler, at least a shade lighter than the nearby Common and Forster's Terns. Among terns in breeding plumage, there is only one in the world with a very thick, all black bill, black legs, and a very pale back. I had discovered a Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*)!

I raced back to my car, got my camera, and quickly shot a roll of film. After this, I noticed a few other details. The bird appeared stocky and this, along with its long legs, gave the impression of a much larger bird despite it being the same overall length as the other *Sterna* terns present. Its underparts were



Gull-billed Tern in flight. Notice the short and shallow forked tail.

white without any markings. The short, slightly forked tail was best seen when the bird was flying. While the bird sat on the beach, its tail was comparably shorter than the other terns nearby. In flight, the bird appeared heavier-looking, wider-winged, and with a slower wing beat. It called a few times, and while I'm not familiar with this species' vocalizations, it did sound different than the calling Common and Forster's Terns. This sighting represents Illinois' first documented record of a Gull-billed Tern.

The Gull-billed Tern winters from the western coast of Mexico to Ecuador and from southern Texas south to the Caribbean coast of Central America. In North America, it nests along marine coasts in marshes and on beaches in Salton Sea, California, Sonora, Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida (Terres J. 1991).

The Gull-billed Tern rarely ventures far inland. Only three records exist at sites between 100 and 200 miles from the sea: southern Arizona

(DeSante & Pyle 1986), eastern Pennsylvania, and northern Mississippi (American Birds 1987-93 & Field Notes 1994-97).

Obviously, an inland report of this tern comes under much scrutiny. One spring sighting, by three independent observers from Lake Erie at Long Point, Ontario on 22 May 1985 (American Birds 39:266) did not appear in the "Annotated Checklist of Ontario birds" (1991), and was probably rejected due to lack of precedence.

Bohlen (1989) considers the following three Illinois reports hypothetical. The first Illinois report was from Chicago's Lake Calumet on 15 and 26 August 1959, but others who later saw the bird from a distance of 100 yards or greater could not confirm the bird's identification (fide Robert Russell). The second report was from Wilmette's Gillson Park (Cook County) on 10 and 15 August 1960. This is an intriguing report since the bird was seen flying overhead and came close to the pier many times for about five minutes (fide Robert Russell). Apparently, no notes were taken of this sighting, which leaves the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee wondering if similar species were eliminated. The last report, 13 August 1967, from Waukegan Beach was a brief flyby observation. One observer now discounts his personal observation as being valid (fide Kim Eckert).

The only documented inland North American records more than 200 miles from known Gull-billed Tern locations are three early fall reports from Indiana (fide Ken Brock) and now Illinois'