

First Illinois Record of the Sandwich Tern

by Laurence C. Binford

As I sauntered north along Waukegan beach on 26 April 1989, my new Zeiss 10x40s in hand and 20x BALscope ashoulder, small flocks of gulls and terns rose, retreated, coalesced, and settled farther ahead. "Lake County's answer to an ocean beach," I thought as I side-stepped the piscine die-off littering the sandy shore and inhaled the pungent "smelt" in the air.

By the time I reached the foot of Greenwood Avenue at 10:30 a.m., the birds had concentrated into a tight mass, which I carefully scoped, identifying and counting each one - 170 Bonaparte's Gulls, about 30 immature Ring-billed Gulls, but not my nemesis state bird, a Laughing Gull. I wondered if I might find a state record Arctic Tern among the 15 Common Terns, but found two Forster's and a lone Caspian. As I was about to leave, I noticed a bird facing directly away that seemed paler-backed than the Bonaparte's Gulls, and, like that species, intermediate in bulk between Common and Caspian terns. Just then the bird turned its head, revealing a black bushy crest and a long, slender black bill with a . . . bright yellow tip!

Realizing there was no previous record of the Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*) for Illinois, I endeavored to scrutinize every feather, first positioning myself so the hazy sun was over my right shoulder and eventually sneaking (as much as one can on a flat, open sandy beach) to within about 50 yards. Extracting some limp scraps of paper from my wallet, I took notes and drew sketches (Figure 1). Three times, the bird slowly stretched its wings over its back, and

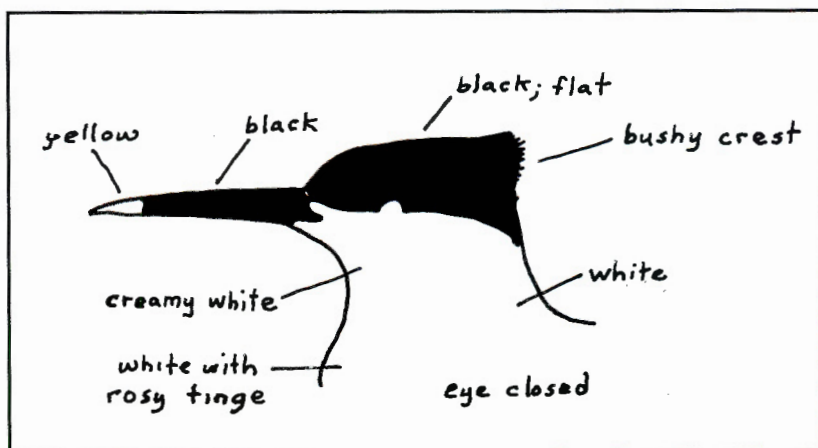


Figure 1. Sketch of Sandwich Tern seen on Waukegan beach, Lake County, 26 April 1989. Drawing by Laurence C. Binford.

the underwing pattern became a drawing. Several times, the bird flushed with the flock, and the all-white, moderately forked tail was recorded for posterity. I had the impression the bird had just arrived. It appeared far more nervous than the other birds in the flock, alertly eyeing its surroundings, often giving ground to its neighbors, and once glancing up to watch three Sharp-shinned Hawks circling southward with the 10 to 15 miles per hour north wind.

"Upon awakening, it preened, gaped several times, and stretched its wings."

Completing an hour of study, I reluctantly left the tern to phone Mary Biss, whose husband, Richard, operates the Chicago Audubon Society's

Bird Report. I knew the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC) would not admit to the state list a one-observer sight record. We needed more witnesses! Mary spread the word.

At 1:15 p.m. I drove to the foot of Greenwood Avenue to await the arrival of other birders. Here, with a distant view of the flock across an intervening channel, I immediately spotted the sleeping Sandwich Tern amid a flock that now numbered some 500 birds. Upon awakening, it preened, gaped several times, and stretched its wings. I, too, stretched and yawned, then returned to my vigil.

But when I looked through the scope, the bird was gone. For half an hour I anxiously searched the flock of gulls and the terns feeding along the shore, but to no avail. This species is said to feed far offshore, and perhaps that is where it went, for it was never seen again.