

Sooty Tern: First Illinois Record

by Frank Bennett



Most years Mother Nature hits some of our coastal states with a hurricane or two, which in turn pushes rain and strong winds well into the inland states. Fellow birders have taught me over the years that displaced coastal bird species sometimes come with the rain and wind. Several birders I know from Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee head out birding when the hurricane winds start blowing.

During the beginning of October 2002, a weather front starting in the Caribbean, packing strong winds from Hurricane Lili, hit the Gulf Coast state of Louisiana moving inland in a northeastwardly direction. This front carried strong steady winds and rain to southern Illinois for multiple days. On the second day of strong winds, 3 October 2002, I started watching for any displaced bird species. On 4 October, while at work, I observed three or four birds utilizing the Ohio River along the Kentucky shoreline at approximately 1:30 p.m. Identification at this range was impossible without bi-noculars, but they appeared to be gull-sized. After work, at 3:30 p.m., I started scanning the river from the parking lot of the power plant where I work, hoping to relocate the birds and identify them. There were no birds over the river, which was basically laden with white caps from one side to the other. The wind had been blowing steadily at 25-30 mph all day long; occasionally, there were even stronger gusts.

I left the plant and headed to the next closest Ohio River access point, the Township of Joppa's boat ramp. As I pulled closer to the river and boat ramp, at approximately 50 to 60 feet away, I noticed a fairly large bird sitting within 10 feet of the river's edge. This bird was facing into the

wind as gulls and terns do during strong gusts, so I could only see the back of the bird, making identification uncertain, but I did see its black back. My first thought was a Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*), remembering Myrna Deaton's bird from a few years back (Deaton 1999). But this bird had black legs (a skimmer has reddish-orange legs) and the overall appearance was tern-like. The bird must have sensed my presence because it turned around to face me briefly before taking off out over the river. It revealed the classic black-and-white plumage of an adult Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*).

When it took flight and headed into the wind, I could see how strong yet graceful it was. The upperparts were blackish; the underparts were white; the legs were black; and it had a black tail above with long, white outer tail feathers. Within a few seconds it swung upstream with the wind and headed toward Metropolis. With the limited number of access points between here and Metropolis I decided to head straight to Ft. Massac State Park in Metropolis. The boat ramp at the park allows a great view of the river in both directions. I left town and headed to Mermet Lake just in case the tern had changed its course of direction, and was looking for some water that was out of the wind. No Sooty Tern or any other tern was observed at Mermet Lake that afternoon. I searched Saturday and Sunday but never relocated the Sooty Tern.

Not until I checked Bohlen (1989) and Robinson (1996) did I

realize the importance of the sighting. The Sooty Tern was a first state record for Illinois (also see the IORC Report in the last issue of Meadowlark, Vol 12, No 2).

That evening after placing the Sooty Tern post on the Illinois birders list serve, I started reading email from the day and got to one very interesting post on neighboring Kentucky's list serve. A friend and Kentucky birder, Dave Roemer, had posted seeing and videotaping two Sooty Terns on Kentucky Lake about an hour earlier than my Illinois/Kentucky border sighting. A third Sooty Tern was seen later that afternoon on Kentucky Lake in a different area, about 30 to 40 miles away. Roemer's sighting and my sighting were both accepted by the Kentucky records committee (Brinkley and Lehman 2003) and are now in the new up-dated "Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Kentucky" by Brainard Palmer-Ball, Jr. The Illinois Ornithological Records Committee has accepted the Illinois sighting as the state's first record of Sooty Tern (Stotz and Johnson 2003).

The Sooty Tern is widespread throughout the tropical oceans, where its range overlaps with both Bridled and Gray-backed Terns. It is "one of the most abundant nesting birds of tropical oceans ... (with a) colony on Dry Tortugas, (Florida), estimated by National Park Service at 100,000 birds. Separation is dif-