

First Record of Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) for Erie County

Brendan Klick

48 Roycroft Blvd. Amherst, NY 14226

On Saturday, 17 Aug 2002, Don Harris and I were birding at Woodlawn Beach State Park, a quarter-mile long sand beach on the eastern end of Lake Erie in Hamburg, Erie County. We observed a tern flush from the waters edge only to land shortly. Our attention was immediately caught by its very small size. It was approximately 40 percent smaller in length than a nearby Common Tern, and after viewing the plumage we immediately identified the bird as an adult Least Tern. The bill was yellow, with a noticeable dusky tip, the forehead white, contrasting the black cap and eyeline, the mantle pale gray; the underparts white. The two outer primaries were black, contrasting the gray inner primaries. The legs were yellow-orange.

During the time of observation the bird was either standing or lying down. When it took flight, it was only momentary, moving little more than a few dozen yards.

I took over sixty photographs of the bird through my spotting scope with a Sony Cybershot DSC-P71 digital camera. Others photographed it as well.

It was observed by dozens of birders on 17 Aug and 18 Aug and many commented on the tern's languorous behavior, raising questions about its health. Their fears were confirmed on 19 Aug when a birder discovered that the Least Tern had deceased. Unfortunately, the specimen was not collected and attempts to find it the following day were unsuccessful.

There was speculation about the death of the bird. Some suggesting that it was caused by the botulism outbreak which was occurring on Lake Erie at that time, others thought it was starvation caused by vagrancy. However, the certain cause will remain unknown.

The Least Tern joins a list of upstate rarities that have occurred on the eastern end of Lake Erie at Woodlawn Beach that includes Gyrfalcon, Piping Plover, American Avocet, Pomarine Jaeger, Long-tailed Jaeger, Laughing Gull, and Franklin's Gull.

This Least Tern represents only the third record of the species for Region 1 and the first for Erie County. The other two records also come from Lake Erie (Chautauqua County) but at different times of the year, 18 May 1993 and 10 Dec 1995 (BOS Database, 1997), with the latter being a juvenile bird. It has also been recorded on Lake Erie from the Niagara Peninsula of Ontario, on 26 Jun 1958 and 11 Nov 1995 (Beardslee and Mitchell, 1965; BOS Database, 1997). Other upstate records from Keuka Lake, Yates County and the Catskills have been attributed to Hurricanes Connie and Hugo, respectively (Skelly, 1998). The occurrence of this Least Tern coincided with no major weather system (Turisk, 2002). However, several Least Terns were reported from the western Great Lakes during August, including individuals at Conneaut Harbor and the Cedar Point Chausee in Ohio, and from Indiana (Fazio, 2002). This led to the speculation, though plausible but impossible to prove, that the bird originated not from the East Coast but from the endangered Mississippi River breeding population.

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