

PROBABLE LEAST TERN PHOTOGRAPHED IN SASKATCHEWAN

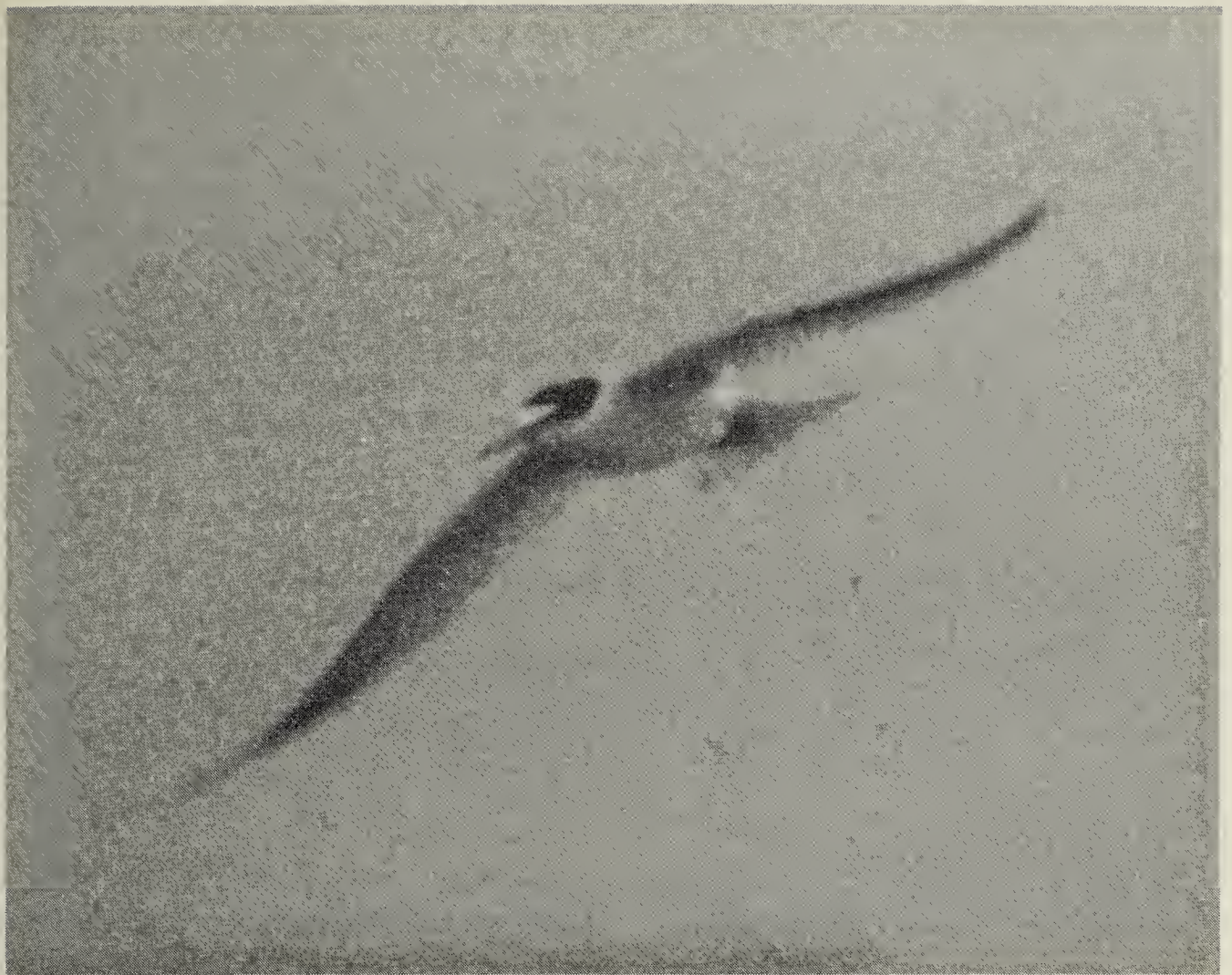
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In the United States, the Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) breeds in coastal and inland aquatic habitats.² The interior population of this species is considered endangered, with about 5,000 individuals remaining.²³ This small tern is rarely seen in Canada. It is considered accidental in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, with sight records for Ontario and a possible specimen record "near Quebec."¹² In 1921, A.C. Bent suggested that "many of the records are doubtful" for Nova Scotia and Ontario, and those for Newfoundland and Labrador "are very doubtful."⁷ A Least Tern, recently photographed in Manitoba, was reported as the first provincial record for this province.^{3,15} It has not been recorded in Alberta¹¹ nor British Columbia.⁹ In Saskatchewan, the Least Tern's presence has been considered hypothetical,^{19,16} however, recently its status was upgraded to confirmed,²¹ based on photographs which we publish with this note. We document, with photographic evidence, a probable sighting of a Least Tern in southern Saskatchewan, reassess the recent status change and summarize Saskatchewan reports of this species.

On 5 June 1991, while participating in the first international Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) census,¹³ we observed a small tern flying at the south end of the Cookson Reservoir near Coronach, Saskatchewan. The tern was briefly observed hovering and diving into water. Skies

were overcast and winds were estimated to be 10-15 km/h. The tern, judged to be about the size of a Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*), had a yellow bill, white forehead, black cap and reddish legs. Its upper primaries were black and its tail was short. Several photographs of the tern were taken by S. Barry and submitted for identification to Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature. After examining the slides, Gosselin indicated "The bird is obviously a Least Tern." However, from the photographs submitted, he could not verify the tail and rump colour which would rule out the "unlikely" possibility that the species was a Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*). Duplicate slides of the tern photographed by Barry were submitted to the Royal Saskatchewan Museum.

The Little Tern, which breeds in Europe, Asia and Africa and was once considered by some as conspecific with the Least Tern,² is nearly identical to the Least Tern but differs in size, voice, and rump and tail colour.¹⁸ Little Terns have longer wings and bills, and lighter coloured tails and rumps than Least Terns.¹⁸ Another possibility is that the species was a Saunders's Tern (*Sterna saundersi*) which is also similar to the above two species but breeds along the Arabian and Red seas and Persian Gulf coast.¹⁰ This latter species can be ruled out as it does not have reddish legs.¹⁰ The Amazon Tern (*Sterna supercilialis*) and the



*Probable Least Tern photographed at Cookson Reservoir,
Saskatchewan, 5 June 1991*

Sam Barry

Table 1. REPORTED SIGHTINGS OF THE LEAST TERN IN SASKATCHEWAN (1957-1991)

Date	Location	Number	Habitat	Source
26 May 1957	near Regina	1 ^a	flooded field	Brazier 1960
early May 1980s ^b	Regina	1	marsh	F. Lahrman, unpub. data
6 July 1981	Fort Qu'Appelle	1	river	Houston and Houston 1986; R. Hooper, pers. comm.
27 July 1982	Rowan's Ravine	2	lake	Lindgren and Lindgren 1986
28 May 1983	Regina	1 ^c	creek	F. Brazier, unpub. data
24 June 1984	Rowan's Ravine	1	lake	Lindgren and Lindgren 1986
26 May 1989	Fort Qu'Appelle	1	river	R. Hooper, unpub. data; Bennett 1989a
24 June 1989 ^d	Estevan	1	river	Smith 1996; A.R. Smith, pers. comm.
5 June 1991	Cookson Reservoir	1 ^e	reservoir	this note
8 June 1991	Lake Diefenbaker	1 ^f	pool on lake shore	W. Harris, pers. comm.; Roy 1996

a) Belcher (1980) considers this sighting to be "an incomplete sight record"; b) year uncertain but approximately 1983 or earlier on Wascana Marsh; c) probable sighting along Wascana Creek; d) the sighting of a Least Tern near Estevan on 2 July 1989, as reported in Bennett (1989b), is probably the same record as that of 24 June 1989 (G. Bennett and S. Shadick, pers. comm.) but with an incorrect date; e) photographed by S. Barry; f) four km east of Grainland.

Peruvian Tern (*Sterna lorata*) were also ruled out (M. Gosselin, *in litt.*).

The nearest Least Tern breeding locations to Saskatchewan are in Montana along the Missouri River^{22,23} about 105 km south of the Cookson Reservoir. We consider it highly unlikely that the tern photographed at Cookson's Reservoir was a Little Tern given that its usual range does not include North America. Also, the American Birding Association¹ and M. Gosselin (pers. comm.) say that the species has not been recorded for North America. The only report of a Little Tern in North America seems to be that of a bird seen at Fort Qu'Appelle by "two young Swedish ornithologists who thought this was an ordinary 'ho hum' sighting of the Little Tern so familiar to them." The bird, however, was recorded as a Least Tern.¹⁴

Although sandbar habitat exists along the South and North Saskatchewan rivers, we think it is unlikely that the Least Tern will establish itself as a breeding species in Saskatchewan. The presence of vagrant

individuals may simply be weather-related, as suggested for the first reported sighting of this species in Saskatchewan.⁸

There are 10 reports of the Least Tern in Saskatchewan (Table 1). Terns were seen primarily by lake or riverine habitat during spring (N=6) and summer (N=4). No fall records are known for this tern in Saskatchewan. All sightings were of single birds, with one exception when two terns were seen. To conclusively verify the occurrence of the Least Tern in Saskatchewan, a specimen would be required or possibly better photographs and a recording of the bird's vocalizations.

It appears that the Least Tern's status, although recently considered confirmed by Smith, based on Barry's photographs, must remain hypothetical in Saskatchewan until a specimen is found or more detailed photographs are taken showing all key characteristics.

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