**European Sandwich Tern in Chatham, Barnstable County, MA**

Submitted by Marshall J. Iliff

In August 2013 a banded Sandwich Tern was spotted around Chatham and Eastham, Cape Cod. At least two other Sandwich Terns were in the area at the same time. I did not observe any of the birds myself.

This is documentation to establish the first Massachusetts record of T. s. sandvicensis. Although field identification is very difficult and sometimes impossible, the characters of this bird, along with the band info, support the occurrence of Massachusetts’ first European Sandwich Tern. Massachusetts does have some records of juveniles that are referable to Cabot’s Tern, so both subspecies are known from the state. Since recent genetic work suggests species status, when possible, the subspecies should be specified on future Sandwich Terns.

Note that all three of these birds are well-documented in eBird. This review should pertain only to Bird A below, the purported European bird, and the review should be limited to whether we consider subspecies identification to be well-established.

Here is the timetable as best I could reconstruct it. In this I have identified the birds as follows:

Bird A – Banded European Sandwich Tern, white-crowned

Bird B – Darker crowned bird on 4 Aug; possibly seen later

Bird C – Even darker crowned bird found 26 Aug

**31 July 2013, South Beach, Chatham (Bird A; banded in UK)**

*Blair Nikula finds and photographs a Sandwich Tern, with metal band on the right leg, with half white crown (some forehead speckling)*

[*http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14823302*](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14823302)

**4 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird B)**

*Ben Lagasse finds a different Sandwich Tern (more black on crown)*

[*http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14847515*](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14847515)

**15 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird B)**

*Ben Lagasse finds Sandwich Tern and considers it likely the same bird as Bird B. His notes read: “*Seems to be the same bird from Coast Guard 8/3*” and the crown pattern is similar.*

[*http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14932961*](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14932961)

**18 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird A, banded in UK, and Bird B?)**

*Keenan Yakola finds and photographs two Sandwich Terns at Nauset Marsh, one of which has minimal white on the crown and metal band on the right leg, and the other of which has more black on the crown (same as 3 Aug bird?). Both appear similar in structure.*

[*http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14954858*](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14954858)

**21 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird A; banded in UK)**

*Jeff Spendelow of USGS is able to read the band numbers on the tern and to see that the band reads “British Trust, London”. No eBird checklist.*

**22 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird C?)**

*John Hoye reports a Sandwich Tern with an extensive dark cap (see email below).*

**28 Aug 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird C)**

*Mary and Ashley Keleher find a fully dark crowned Sandwich Tern, thus different from Bird A or Bird B.*

[*http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15022837*](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15022837)

**5 Sep 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird A; banded in UK)**

*Ellison Orcutt relocates the banded bird and reports it here with photos:*

*[http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15104899](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15104899" \t "_blank)*

**6 Sep 2013, Nauset Marsh (Bird A; banded in UK)**

*Mark Faherty and Peter Trimble relocate the banded bird and report it here with photos:*

*[http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15110510](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15110510" \t "_blank)*

**9 Sep 2013, North Beach (Bird B or C or D)**

*Carl Goodrich finds an unbanded Sandwich Tern with an extensive white crown on North Beach.*

*[http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15132950](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S15132950" \t "_blank)*

**BAND INFO**

The key information on this bird pertains to the band that was read by Jeff Spendelow. Here is the email chain that reports this:

---------- Forwarded message ----------  
From: **Keenan Yakola** <keen05@msn.com>  
Date: Tue, Aug 27, 2013 at 8:51 PM  
Subject: [MASSBIRD] Sandwich Terns Nauset Inlet  
To: massbird@theworld.com

Hello Massbirders,

I have some exciting news for you all. On August 21st Jeff Spendelow of USGS (a Roseate Tern Researcher) read the band that was on one of the Sandwich Terns that has been seen at the Nauset Inlet. He was extremely surprised when he read the words "British Trust", and "London" on the band! I was stalling posting this because I was hoping to hear back from Jeff about where the bird was banded but unfortunately he hasn't heard back yet. As soon as I know I will let all of you know about some of the details on the bird. As noted by Ellison and Mary there are at least 3 Sandwich Terns in the area of the Nauset Inlet. Pretty cool stuff!

If anyone wants to take a look at some of the photos of the bird from England I have attached some links below.

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9609160967/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9609160967/" \t "_blank)

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9612394932/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9612394932/in/photostream/" \t "_blank)

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9540526863/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9540526863/in/photostream/" \t "_blank)

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9540525657/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/scolopax/9540525657/in/photostream/" \t "_blank)

These links were posted to the ABA Rare Bird Alert groups about distinguishing different subspecies of Sandwich Terns

[http://www.nabirding.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Sandwich-Cabots-Terns-Garner-et-al-2007-1.pdf](http://www.nabirding.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Sandwich-Cabots-Terns-Garner-et-al-2007-1.pdf" \t "_blank)

[http://www.nabirding.com/2011/09/25/sandwich-or-cabots/](http://www.nabirding.com/2011/09/25/sandwich-or-cabots/" \t "_blank)

Hopefully I will come across this bird again before I have to head back to school and get some better photos. Perhaps even read the band myself!

Good birding,

Keenan Yakola

Eastham, Ma

Date: Wed, Sep 11, 2013 at 5:08 PM  
Subject: [MASSBIRD] Sandwich Tern band info  
To: Massbird <Massbird@theworld.com>  
  
Jeff Spendelow got back to me with the info on the banded Sandwich Tern that has been around from Eastham to Chatham. According to Mark Grantham of the British Trust for Ornithology, this tern was banded as a chick on Coquet Island, Northumberland, England in 2002. Jeff noted that he had a banded Sandwich Tern on North Beach, Chatham two years ago that he suspects was this same bird given that it is 11 years old. Roseates also nest on Coquet Island - I wonder if any of them came across as well. We know from band resighting work by Mass Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program and USGS that the Cape is a hugely important fall staging area for Roseate Terns from Long Island to Canada, but maybe they are coming across the pond as well. And who knows - maybe a lot of our Sandwich tern records are of European birds.  
  
[http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/c/coquetisland/about.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/c/coquetisland/about.aspx" \t "_blank)  
  
Mark Faherty  
Science Coordinator  
Mass Audubon/Wellfleet Bay

**IDENTIFICATION AND EXPERT OPINIONS**

The eBird article gives some information on identification of this bird. Identification of adults is a challenge, to say the least, but some traits of this bird suggest European origin.

Although Martin Garner is appropriately cautious, he does provide some worthwhile commentary on this record:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | | **martin.go@virgin.net** | | https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif9/18/13  https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif |  | **https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif**  **https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif** |
| |  | | --- | | to Marshall, Ian, Brian, Chris, Jessie  https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif | | | |

Hi Marshall and friends

Apologies for taking so long to respond. It’s not out of lack of interest! I have been pretty pre-occupied with Birdfair at Rutland and then launching a certain Migration Festival thing at Spurn. At last I have had a moment to start catching up.

This is of course an amazing record whichever taxa is involved. Given that acuflavida has reached Europe and that there are instances of Nearctic species reaching Britain and returning to North America (Ring-billed Gull and maybe American Wigeon? spring to mind), I tried not to be swayed and see what identification features I could see on this bird irrespective of any known ‘life history’.

First point is that that when we did the research which culminated in the Dutch Birding paper, we reckoned that the period in which the photos of this bird are taken (July and August in N America) is the most difficult to separate Sandwich and Cabot’s terns *“with the effects of wear and moult at their peak during late summer and autumn, this may be the most difficult period to establish a frim identification”.*Broadly speaking I still think this is true.

However there are some clues on this bird, at least as I interpret the photos.

1) The head pattern shows quite extensive plain looking white patch on the forehead to mid crown. The black rear crown feathers are relatively short and fairly obviously peppered with white tips etc. While the plain white area may suggest acuflavida I think it is OK for some sandvicensis. Sort of equivocal for adults. You would expect more black peppering in white area in 1cy birds. However the black rear crown feathers is for me more typical of sandvicensis than acuflavida. Short and obviously white peppered- versus in the vast majority of cases longer, greasy looking and any white tips very tiny on acuflavida- probably hardly visible on the quality of these images. While it’s not absolute and there may be extreme examples of both taxa that fit this head pattern, by gut would be it favours sandvicensis

2) The bill shape is quite deep based but I get the impression of a longish bill, obviously decurved slightly and rather fine over the distal half. Difficult to quantify and I wouldn’t stake the full ID (extremes of both taxa can be more obvious)  on it but on balance I would favour sandvicensis

3) Most compelling for me are the tips off the outer primaries. These feathers are all old and worn and the critical width of white on the inner web and feather tip is not longer visible. However in some birds white pigmented parts or feathers wear faster than black ones. This is perhaps more familiar in Two-barred Crossbills, in which worn tertials have no white tips left but the shape of the worn tertials can clearly be traced where the white pattern once was. On this bird in a couple of different photos you can clearly see the feather tip is not neatly rounded or pointed but has little ‘pimple’ for a tip- the inner web stopping short of the tip and leaving extra section of outer web extending on. This is the expected shape of wear for a sandvicensis with its broad white tip and broader white fringed on the inner web. On acuflavida the white fringes and tip is too thin to leave such an obvious wear pattern. You may well know that Greg Neise first flagged this up to me on the (to me obvious sandvicensis) he had in Chicago.

In short I think this is a ‘sandvicensis’. I am not sure I would be unequivocal/ 100% as I think that e.g. the Chicago bird is a more obvious example, however re-introducing the ‘ring’ element on this bird, the most parsimonious explanation is this is European Sandwich Tern, ringed in UK and travelling to N. American- based on both plumage/structure and parsimony.

For me it breaks through the credibility barrier- European Sandwich Terns can and do reach North American (as well s vice versa!)

Hope that helps

Cheers Martin

**From:** [Marshall Iliff](mailto:miliff@aol.com" \o "miliff@aol.com" \t "_blank)

**Sent:** Wednesday, August 28, 2013 4:14 PM

**To:** [Martin Garner](mailto:martin.go@virgin.net" \o "martin.go@virgin.net" \t "_blank) ; [Ian Lewington](mailto:lewbirder@btinternet.com" \o "lewbirder@btinternet.com" \t "_blank)

**Cc:** [Brian Sullivan](mailto:bls42@cornell.edu" \o "bls42@cornell.edu" \t "_blank) ; [Chris Wood](mailto:clw37@cornell.edu" \o "clw37@cornell.edu" \t "_blank) ; [Jessie Barry](mailto:jb794@cornell.edu" \o "jb794@cornell.edu" \t "_blank)

**Subject:** Re: Sandwich Tern ID

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gif

Guys,

Also this image, apparently the same bird: [http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14823302](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14823302" \t "_blank)

Several other Cape Cod, Massachusetts, photo records from this past August. Hard to reconcile how many birds are around. Zooming in and clicking on the map will show the ones with photos.

[http://ebird.org/ebird/map/santer1](http://ebird.org/ebird/map/santer1" \t "_blank)

Best,

Marshall

On Wed, Aug 28, 2013 at 10:58 AM, Marshall Iliff <[miliff@aol.com](mailto:miliff@aol.com" \t "_blank)> wrote:

Martin and Ian,

If you have a chance, we'd love opinions on this tern (specifically, the more white-crowned bird).

[http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14954858](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14954858" \t "_blank)

I am trying to get better images from the photographer.

We'd like to get a quick, timely post up on eBird (and maybe Frontiers too?). You guys are the expert in separation of Sandwich from Cabot's Tern, so we'd really value your opinion on this bird.

Your article is available online here: [http://www.nabirding.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Sandwich-Cabots-Terns-Garner-et-al-2007-1.pdf](http://www.nabirding.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Sandwich-Cabots-Terns-Garner-et-al-2007-1.pdf" \t "_blank)

Hopefully it is OK if we link to it or provide a download via eBird. Please let us know about that.

Best,

Marshall Iliff

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Marshall J. Iliff  
miliff AT [aol.com](http://aol.com/" \t "_blank)  
West Roxbury, MA  
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eBird/AKN Project Leader  
[www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org/" \t "_blank)  
[www.avianknowledge.net](http://www.avianknowledge.net/" \t "_blank)  
Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
Ithaca, NY  
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**OTHER SIGHTINGS**

---------- Forwarded message ----------  
From: **John Hoye** <Lt.Jaeger@verizon.net>  
Date: Wed, Aug 28, 2013 at 4:38 PM  
Subject: Re: Question about your Sandwich Tern observation in eBird  
To: miliff@aol.com  
  
  
Hi Marshall  
  Unfortunately I did not have my camera with me.  I was with WBWS trip with Ellison Orcutt.  There were pictures taken by two birders from RI who said they were going to send them to Ellison.  
  My view was mostly from behind but when I did get a profile view I thought suprisingly that there was a full black cap.  This was a suprise as the two other Sandwich Terns together photographed by Keenan Yokola had a great deal of frontal bossing and one of those birds was banded.  Our bird was not banded and appeared similar to the bird that Mary Kelleher photographed yesterday.  
   My view of things is that the presence of three different Sandwich Terns at Nauset Beach  at the same time likely points to a common origin in this case ?Europe

   John Hoye  
----- Original Message ----- From: <[miliff@aol.com](mailto:miliff@aol.com" \t "_blank)>  
To: <[Lt.jaeger@verizon.net](mailto:Lt.jaeger@verizon.net" \t "_blank)>  
Cc: <[miliff@aol.com](mailto:miliff@aol.com" \t "_blank)>  
Sent: Wednesday, August 28, 2013 3:08 PM  
Subject: Question about your Sandwich Tern observation in eBird

Dear John Hoye,  
  
Any photos?  
  
The Sandwich Tern situation this year is getting really interesting, as we may have our first European bird ever on our hands. This split narrowly missed in the AOU this year; expect it for the future.  
  
If you did not get photos, a detailed description of the bird's cap would be most helpful. Did it have a full black cap? Some white on the forehead? How much?  
  
Any bands?  
  
Species: Sandwich Tern  
Count: 1  
Observation date: Aug 22, 2013  
Location: Nauset Marsh, Barnstable, US-MA  
Submission ID: S14984698  
[http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14984698](http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S14984698" \t "_blank)  
  
In your description, it is often very helpful to include how similar species were eliminated. If you saw and remember relevant field marks please take note of those and tell me about them. If you identified the bird by voice, a description of this is often helpful. The best supporting evidence for any bird record is a photograph, which you can simply attach in an email response to me, or embed directly into your eBird checklist (click [http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/973966-adding-photos-videos-and-recordings-to-checklists](http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/973966-adding-photos-videos-and-recordings-to-checklists" \t "_blank) for details on that process). If you do embed a photo, please drop me a note to let me know that you did.  
  
If you were not sure about the identification, please let me know. Without sufficient supporting details, the sighting will be left as unconfirmed and therefore not included in the output for scientific analysis, but your personal records and lists will be kept intact. If you do wish to edit the observation, you can do so from the checklist link above (just click 'edit species' on that page and change it as needed).  
  
We strive for a high level of data quality at eBird not only because eBird is a scientific database, but also because we want to provide the best resources for the birding community. Birders use eBird every day to learn about bird distribution and occurrence, and your data are a valuable part of that process. If you'd like to learn more about the eBird data quality process click here: ([http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/1055676-understanding-the-ebird-review-and-data-quality-process](http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/1055676-understanding-the-ebird-review-and-data-quality-process" \t "_blank)).  
  
Thanks for your understanding and for any help that you can provide. And most importantly, thank you for using eBird. Your participation is valued, and the observations you submit are an important part of helping us better understand birds and biodiversity in your area and around the world.  
  
Marshall Iliff  
[miliff@aol.com](mailto:miliff@aol.com" \t "_blank)