



Short-billed Dowitcher and Black-bellied Plover fly over East Pond at dusk.

Coastal Steward's Letter, July 29 - August 5, 2020.

"These Sooty Terns... are lucky." This is my favorite opening line from the BBC documentary series "The Life of Birds", narrated by David Attenborough. Sir David, who finds himself on a remote island in the Seychelles, walks among this sprawling colony of sand-nesting birds with no mind from the terns themselves. It is a spectacular site, and one unique to the equatorial regions of our globe.

The **Sooty Terns** that found themselves smattered across the southern New England coastline in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaias, however, were not as lucky. At the time I write this article, it is believed that a staggering thirty-three of these far-flung terns from the Caribbean have made an appearance within the state, all within the last 48-hours or so. Two were recorded from the island of Tuckernuck.

I'll preface this species profile by saying that the Sooty Tern is a *big* tern. At approximately 16 inches in length and with a 32 inch wingspan, it dwarfs the abundant and ubiquitous **Common Tern** by almost four inches from tail to head. This may not sound like much, but in the field, this characteristic leaves a lasting impression.

These birds are best known for their ability to remain in flight for years at a time. Between the time a bird fledges and the time it returns to a breeding site to nest at 6-8 years of age, the Sooty Tern will seldom seek land to rest and rarely do so on water (although they occasionally land on a sea turtle's back or some flotsam), as their feathers are especially susceptible to becoming water-logged. Birds will both drink and catch prey in flight, many by a practice known as "dipping".

In several of the populated Pacific archipelagoes where Sooty Tern breed, they are heavily predated by local peoples for their eggs - making it a threatened species in some parts of the world. Increasing El Niño events in tropical oceans may also spell disaster for such colonies, and much like the nesting **Least Tern** and Common Tern that find themselves on Whale Point most years, certain weather events like hurricanes or thunderstorms have the potential to lead to total nest abandonment.

On August 5, Bill Howard noticed an odd bird on Bigelow's Point that he described as being "skimmer-sized" and with an all-black back and white collar, which he later identified as a Sooty Tern. Later that evening, while seawatching at Whale Point, I had another Sooty Tern that I believe to be a separate individual than the one Bill had earlier on in the day. My views were far less ideal, however, and at about a mile out, the bird appeared little more than a black-and-white dot on the horizon.

Other significant finds this week come in the form of shorebirds, which are still migrating through en masse. The adult **Hudsonian Godwit**, included in last week's report, continues this week but with much more erratic movements across the island. This bird has been jumping around from Whale Pond to East Pond to North Pond, and can't seem to make up its mind about any of them. Perhaps the most reliable time to check for this unusual transient would be at East Pond during dead low. This individual has a particular affinity to the flats there, and is often seen alongside the plethora **Short-billed Dowitcher**, **Greater Yellowlegs**, and **Willet** that congregate there to feed.

Five **Killdeer** made an appearance this week on the beach at Whale Point, an unusual setting for this typical denizen of short-grass fields and meadows. Juvenile **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** continues to be seen in North Pond, with up to eight being observed on July 31st. In the maritime oak forests near the fire house, **House Wren** and **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** continue to be heard, but seldom seen. Both are reclusive and skittish vocalists of the treetops there.

Be on the lookout for a **Brown Sand Shark** that has been hanging out in the shallows between the Souza Pier and the mouth of East Pond. Although not dangerous to humans, they can grow up to six feet long and are easily recognizable by their sizable dorsal fin.

That's all for now. This has been another fantastic week on Tuckernuck!

Best,

Skyler Kardell

"Bird migration is complex and poorly understood, and it is not always easy to know which birds are migrating. This is part of the challenge and the appeal of seawatching, and one of the areas in which seawatching can make significant contributions to our knowledge of birds." - Cameron Cox



A Sanderling walks the shores of Whale Point at dusk, and a regal Hudsonian Godwit delights observers at North Pond - it was originally found on 7/29.



Close-ups of the shoreline by East Pond, with seaweed scattered on the rocks.



A White-rumped Sandpiper and a Semipalmated Sandpiper, two look-alike species separated by the former's longer bill, longer primary projection, and distinctive white rump in flight.



A Sooty Tern sticks out like a sore thumb in a flock of mixed Common and Roseate Tern, distinguished by large size and jet-black wings. A Semipalmated Plover allows close approach.

Tuckernuck Island is private property, accessed only by explicit permission by landowner(s).