

SHORT NOTE

A first documented record of black-naped tern (*Sterna sumatrana*) for Tutuila Island, American Samoa

SAMUEL E.I. JONES

The Institute for Bird Populations, P. O. Box 1346, Point Reyes Station, California 94956, USA, and
 Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources, American Samoa Government, P.O. Box 3730, Pago Pago
 AS 96799, USA

The black-naped tern (*Sterna sumatrana*) has a widespread distribution throughout the Indian Ocean, South-east Asia, Indo-malaya and the western tropical Pacific (Gochfield & Burger 1996). It breeds in small, generally mono-specific colonies on coral cays or gravel on islands throughout the region (Hulsman & Smith 1988), although it has also been recorded to breed on artificial structures (Gochfield & Burger 1996). The black-naped tern is represented by 2 subspecies, *S. s. mathewsi* in the western Indian Ocean and the nominate form *S. s. sumatrana* throughout the rest of its range. Despite its widespread occurrence throughout the tropical Pacific, it is largely absent from the central Pacific. Populations are generally sedentary, although vagrants have been recorded in Tanzania (Baker & Boswell 1989) and South Africa (Sinclair 1977) on the easterly limits of its range and Lord Howe Island (McAllan *et al.* 2004), New South Wales (Bigg 1984) and Western Australia (Higgins & Davies 1996) on the southerly edge of its Pacific distribution.

However, the black-naped tern appears to have a low propensity for vagrancy compared to many of its highly transient congeners, perhaps as a product of its inshore habitat preferences (Smith 1993; Hulsman & Smith 1988) and probable low pelagic dispersal.

The distribution of the black-naped tern in Polynesia is relatively patchy, with breeding confirmed only in Fiji, Tonga and recently in Samoa (Tarbuton 2001; Watling 2004), although it is also suspected of breeding in Tuvalu and Tokelau to the north. It is increasingly uncommon further east to the northern Cook Islands (*e.g.*, Penrhyn, Manihiki and Suvarrow; Pratt *et al.* 1987). Considering its low breeding densities and the low observer coverage in this area, its breeding and general occurrence is likely to be under-reported throughout the tropical Pacific, as evidenced by recent discoveries of new breeding populations (*e.g.*, Kolby *et al.* 2009).

The black-naped tern is considered rare in the Samoan islands, a status supported by its only recently confirmed (although increasing) breeding on Upolu, Western Samoa (Tarbuton 2001), with previous apparent breeding reports considered

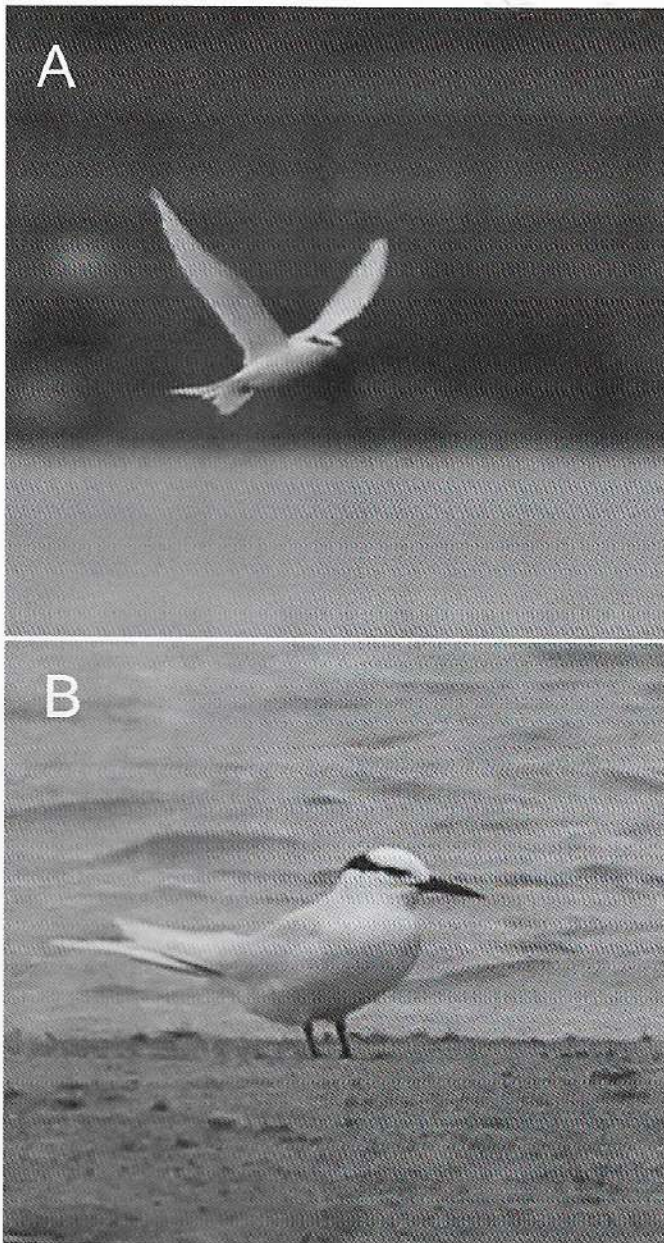


Fig. 1. Black-naped tern (*Sterna sumatrensis*) Pala Lagoon, Tutuila, American Samoa. (A) In flight at Papa Lagoon. (B) At rest on exposed low tide mud. Photos by author.

erroneous (Amerson *et al.* 1982). The black-naped tern has also been reported as a vagrant in American Samoa with single records on Swains Island in 1967 and a lone specimen collected on Rose Atoll in 1923 (Clapp 1968; Amerson *et al.* 1982; Banks 1984). A further record from Ofu/Olesaga has also been reported (Craig 2005), although the provenance of this remains unclear. Here, I present the first record of black-naped tern on Tutuila, the largest island in the American Samoan archipelago, providing the first documented record of the species in American Samoa since 1967.

On 25 December 2013 a single adult bird was observed fishing (Fig. 1A) and then roosting (Fig. 1B) on the exposed low tide mud at Pala Lagoon (14°19'06.6 S, 170°42'11.6 W) on the Tafuna plain

area of the island. The bird was initially detected at 1800 h and observed for ~1 h until sundown. It was then not seen again until 24 February 2014 but was present until at least 30 March 2014. The bird spent large amounts of time fishing in the lagoon, interspersed with periods of preening and resting on exposed sandbars at low tide. Although it was not possible to specifically identify the individual as the same throughout, it seems reasonable to assume these sightings pertain to the same individual, considering its consistent location, difficulties in monitoring the large lagoon from few viewing points and its relative rarity in American Samoa.

The avifauna of American Samoa, at least on the larger, inhabited islands, is relatively well understood compared to many other island states in the region (but see Rauzon & Fialua 2003; Adler *et al.* 2010). Considering the available habitat present across the island of Tutuila (primarily rocky coast and tropical forest), it appears unlikely that this record of a black-naped tern on Tutuila pertains to an undetected breeding presence. The arrival and origins of this individual are thus uncertain, but may have been a product of dispersal from a breeding colony in independent Samoa, either from Upolu (c. 120 km) or a currently unknown breeding locality.

The relative rarity of black-naped tern throughout the Samoan islands is of particular interest considering its conservation concern in the region (Watling 2004). Records of this nature are of potential importance in understanding the colonisation potential and dispersal dynamics of black-naped terns in the tropical Pacific, particularly where suitable breeding habitat exists (*e.g.*, Rose Atoll). Although open to conjecture, greater coverage may perhaps reveal its breeding presence to be more widespread than currently understood in the region.

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