

Some bird species are frequently more easily identified by the general impression created by their collective field marks than by the individual field marks themselves. This can be usefully applied when trying to identify birds in photographs where certain specific markings may be obscured or be otherwise difficult to determine. August's *At a Glance* photo provides an example where the holistic approach to identification can be profitably put to use.

The first step in identifying the pictured bird is to determine the bird's proper family. A close look at the tail reveals a slight notch, and the head seems to be black-capped. The bill appears stout and uniformly dark. The neck looks short and thick, and the body appears chunky. The bird's wings are fairly broad, not long, thin, and streamlined. Additionally, the wings appear to have a strong pattern--possibly dark primaries, a secondary window, and a grayish inner wing.

When considering these impressions, the birder's mind should run in two directions. First, the seemingly bold wing pattern, unmarked notched tail, and dark bill could suggest adult Sabine's Gull. However, adult Sabine's Gulls have complete hoods, much like a Laughing Gull and even in changing or winter plumage would not display a neatly capped appearance. The apparently patterned wing can be dismissed as an artifact created by strong back-lighting. The other logical choice then is some species of tern.

Keep in mind that we are viewing a bird whose stubby tail, chunky body, thick neck, and stout bill caused us to briefly consider a gull species as a possibility. Given that the tern in question has a black cap, it is apparently in breeding plumage, so its lack of a long, deeply forked tail readily eliminates Roseate, Common, Arctic, and Forster's terns as candidates. The thick neck, chunky body, stout bill, and notably broad wings serve not only to remove Least and Sandwich terns as possibilities but also to reinforce the impression that the bird is not one of the Massachusetts breeding tern species.



Careful analysis of the composite impression created by the bird's appearance in the photograph should lead the reader to the conclusion that the mystery bird is a Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*), the only tern species that shares the features noted above. Unfortunately, the bird's distinctive black legs are only barely visible in the photograph. Although not yet breeding in Massachusetts, Gull-billed Terns are slowly colonizing Long Island, New York, and the species does appear casually in the Commonwealth, mostly in early summer or following fall hurricanes. The pictured bird was photographed by Oliver Komar.

# AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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