

FIRST LEAST TERN IN MONTANA

P. D. SKAAR, Biology Department, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59715

About noon on 20 July 1974 I saw an immature Least Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) at the northeastern corner of the Cottonwood Reservoir along U. S. Highway 89 about four miles north of Wilsall, Park County, Montana. I observed the bird in bright sunlight through a 20X scope for about 20 minutes, often as close as 50 feet. The length and wing-span were no more than twice those of two brown-backed swallows (probably Rough-winged Swallows, *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*) that twice harassed the tern closely. Both coloration and behavior differentiated it from an immature Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*). The bill was black, and the head was white except for a dark eye-stripe connected to a dark nape. The tail was short, shallowly indented and white except for a dusky terminal band. The back was grayish; the underparts were white. Most importantly, the upper wing surface was strikingly patterned. The outer primaries were blackish, a triangle extending from the body to the wrist was grayish, and a triangle extending from most of the trailing edge of the wing to the wrist was white. The bird hovered repeatedly and made several long vertical dives into the water. On one dive it took a small fish or tadpole. No call was heard. I am familiar with Least Terns from many observations on Long Island, New York. Three other observers were alerted but found no identifiable tern at the site later in the afternoon. This is the first record for the state, since the Montana specimen mentioned by Saunders (Pacific Coast Avifauna No. 14, 1921) was actually taken in Nebraska (Skaar, Clapp and Banks, Condor 75:132-133, 1973). The nearest breeding area known is along the Missouri River in central North Dakota.



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