

LITTLE TERN

Sternula albifrons

non-breeding visitor, occasional; rare breeding visitor *S.a. pusilla* and/or *sinensis*

Little and [Least](#) terns are sibling species that occur in the Old and New Worlds, respectively. They were considered the same species until Massey (1976, followed by the AOU 1983) split them, an opinion that has since gained widespread acceptance. The Little Tern breeds from Europe to Japan, wintering S to c. Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951c, Cramp and Simmons 1985, Higgins and Davies 1996). The difficulty in separating these two closely related species (hereafter "small terns") has led to uncertainty about their status in the Pacific Basin, including the Hawaiian Islands (Clapp 1989; *AB* 41:150, 44:1190). Substantiated Little Terns have been recorded from Micronesia (Reichel et al. 1989, Wiles et al. 2000) as far E as the Marshall Is (Schipper 1985, Clapp 1990), while unidentified individuals recorded from Kiribati, Samoa, and Johnston Atoll (22 May 1996) may also have been most likely Little Terns.

In the *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands*, small numbers of Little Terns were documented during summer in the 1980-2000s, and isolated breeding by single pairs has been confirmed on at least three occasions (Clapp 1989, Conant et al. 1991, Pyle et al. 2001). Because Least Terns have also been collected and confirmed as breeding in the Northwestern Islands (see [Least Tern](#)), we treat as unsubstantiated all records of small terns not adequately documented by specimen, photograph, or detailed description of call notes and/or plumage. Although several reports of Little Terns exist from the Southeastern Hawaiian Islands, these are either undocumented or are accompanied by descriptions that favor [Least](#) over Little tern (e.g., *E* 48:113).

Between 1993 and 2000, 2-4 adult and first-summer small terns were present each year on *Midway*, and the observation of 2 adults feeding 2 juveniles 28 Aug 1995 suggests breeding there that year, at least. Although the majority of these individuals were not substantiated to species, descriptions and photographs (e.g., [HRBP](#) 1128, *NAB* 51:1057) indicate that at least one Little Tern was present each year. Critical study and monitoring documented unsuccessful breeding by both species on Midway in Jun-Jul 1999 and successful breeding by Little Terns in Jun-Aug 2000 (Pyle et al. 2001, *NAB* 53:436; [HRBP](#) 1230-1233, 1237, 1279-1288 published *NAB* 53:448, 55:3-5). Breeding by small terns was again noted on Midway in June 2001 but the species was not confirmed, and Rowlett (2002) identified 2 Little Terns (along with 8 [Least Terns](#)) there 8-10 Sep 2002. There is also a specimen of an adult Little Tern from Midway 15 Aug 1989 (BPBM 178089). The earliest spring arrival of a confirmed Little Tern on Midway was on 7 May (1997; [HRBP](#) 1128) and the latest fall record was for 20 Sep (2000).

At *Kure* two Little Terns were photographed in Jun 2002 ([HRBP](#) 1367-1370) and at *Pearl and Hermes*, small terns were present in the summers of 1984-1988 and breeding was confirmed in 1988 (Conant et al. 1991). Photographs taken in Aug 1986 (Figure 2 in Conant et al. 1991) and 2 Jul 1988 ([HRBP](#) 0880), along with the recollections of Conant upon seeing both small tern species on Midway (Pyle et al. 2001) confirms that most if not all were Little Terns. Other substantiated records of Little Terns have been recorded from *Laysan* 10-17 Jul 1986 ([HRBP](#) 0496-0497) and 28-29 Aug 1989 ([HRBP](#) 0857), and *French Frigate* 2 Jun 1985 (Clapp 1989, BPBM 161866), 18 Jul

1990, and 8 Sep 2006 (BPBM 185077). The 1985 specimen was the basis for addition of this species to the AOU checklist (AOU 1987). Other unidentified small terns from Midway (5 individuals in 1982; *E* 44:110, [HRBP](#) 0364, 5430; 4 in 1990, 1 in 1991, and 1 in 2008), Kure (1982, *E* 44:110; 1985), Laysan (1978; *E* 40:29), and French Frigate (1979, including a pair with a juvenile; 1980; 1981, and 1985), likely included Little Terns.

The two specimens have been identified as the subspecies *S.a. pusilla* of Indonesia (Clapp 1989) whereas the Little Terns on Midway in 1999-2000 showed characteristics of *S.a. sinensis* of the w. Pacific (Pyle et al. 2001). It is possible that both subspecies occur in the islands. Four other subspecies are recognized from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia (Higgins and Davies 1996, Clements 2007).

[Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

[Literature cited](#)

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