Bridled Terns occur uncommonly in warmer waters around the world (Harrison 1983, Cramp and Simmons 1985, Higgins and Davies 1996, AOU 1998). In the n. Pacific Basin they breed off Mexico and in Palau but with few additional observations of birds at sea or vagrants: a single record in the Marshall Is (Pratt et al. 1987) and a few records from southern California (CBRC 2007). They were combined along with other terns in the genus Sterna until tern genera were split by the AOU (2006).

There are two records for Bridled Tern from waters around the Southeastern Hawaiian Islands. The first record was of one photographed 8 km NW of the nw. tip of Ni'ihau 12 Jun 2012 (HRBP 6648-6651) and the second was of one 7 km off the Kona Airport, Hawai'i I, 24 Apr 2015 (HRBP 6652-6654). Based on the first record, the HBRC accepted this species to the Hawaiian Islands Checklist in Jul 2014. The two Pacific subspecies differ primarily in the shade of the back: nominate S.a. anaethetus of the SW Pacific has a darker back and less white in the outer rectrices than S.a. nelsoni found off Mexico (Cramp and Simmons 1985, Higgins and Davies 1996). The bird photographed off Ni'ihau is dark-backed, and we are confident that it represents anaethetus, whereas the bird off Hawai'i I appears distinctly paler and may represent nelsoni, though we are less-confident assigning this subspecies to it.

Prior to these records there were erroneous and dubious reports of Bridled Tern from the Hawaiian Islands. Bloxam (1827) collected and described a tern near O'ahu as Sterna Woahuensis or Oahuensis. Finsch and Hartlaub (1867), followed by Dole (1869, 1879), applied the name "Sterna panaya" (an old name for Bridled Tern) to Bloxam's bird, Although the specimen cannot now be located, the description may best fit a juvenile Sooty Tern (Olson 1996a). Following this, Warren (1966) lists a specimen at British Museum (BMNH1847.3.4.95) as a syntype for Bloxham's S. oahuensis, which was "collected by Lord Byron and presented by Admiral Sir E. Belcher", commander of the H.M.S. Sulphur that visited Hawaii in 1837 and 1839 (Olson and James 1994). The specimen, an adult Bridled Tern, does not fit Bloxam's description and is unlikely his specimen (Olson 1996a:27), although a juvenile Sooty Tern accessioned with the same batch (BMNH 1847.3.4.95) could be the individual collected by Bloxam. Bryan (1958) gives "Bridled Tern" as another name for Gray-backed Tern, perhaps relating to some of the earlier confusion. King (1967) records Bridled Tern from Hawaii but the basis for this is unknown to us. Finally, a tern photographed in a breeding colony on Eastern I, Midway Atoll 5 Jun 2008 (HRBP 5496-5497 published NAB 62:632) shows characters suggesting a hybrid of a Sooty Tern with either Bridled Tern (as suggested somewhat by the bird's appearance) or Gray-backed Tern (more likely in this mixed colony) but its identification remains unconfirmed (it may also be just an aberrant Sooty Tern).

Acronyms and Abbreviations

http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/birds/rlp-monograph/