

Australian Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa*, Kuala Baram Wetlands, Miri, Sarawak

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To use a cooking analogy appropriate to my name, this record was definitely more of a slow cooked goulash than instant noodles!

Ever since learning that Australian Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* had been split from Gull-billed Tern *G. nilotica*, and that there were small numbers of birds reaching Indonesia, my interest was piqued in the possibility of one making it to Malaysia one day. I read up what I could on them, and, on a visit to New South Wales in December 2023, I made it a priority to try to see and study them, which I did on two occasions (Plate 1).



Plate 1: Australian Terns, Shoalhaven Heads, New South Wales, Australia, 18 Dec 2023. In Basic plumage, the head pattern of Australian Terns is distinctively different from that of Gull-billed Terns. Note also the heavy bill, with strongly decurved culmen and weak gonys.

Although Australian Terns breed on ephemeral inland lakes in Australia at any time of year, my hypothesis was that the best chance of finding one in Malaysia might be in the northern spring, as Gull-billed Terns, some of which winter in Australia, head north, perhaps picking up a stray Australian as they do so.

The plot thickened, however, when a putative Australian Tern was picked out with Gull-billed Terns in the Inner Gulf of Thailand in September 2024, hardly a spring overshoot. A couple of months later, I painstakingly checked through the roosting flock of 2000+ Gull-billed Terns at Sejingkat Power Station, Kuching, but to no avail. I also pored over eBird photos of Gull-billed Terns in Malaysia to see if I could find a likely candidate, but again drew a blank.

On 17 April, 2025, despite my hypothesis that spring would be the time to find one in Malaysia, I was not thinking at all about the possibility of Australian Tern when I visited my local patch, as I do on a weekly basis. During the morning, I did spot a lone *Gelochelidon* tern as it flew

away from me, but gave it no more than a cursory glance, assuming it was a late migrant Gull-billed Tern. And there the trail would have ended, were it not for my habit of checking Facebook and a conscientious neighbour!

My neighbour, CY Tan, also visits Kuala Baram Wetlands regularly and takes photos of what he sees, posting them to his FB account. As I was browsing his pictures the following day, I came across two photos of a tern, somewhat backlit, with an enormous bill! My first thought was that this could be an Australian Tern, followed quickly by a second thought that this was the bird I had dismissed as a Gull-billed the previous day! I immediately shot off a message to Jeff Davies, co-author of the *Australian Bird Guide*, who, equally promptly, replied that he was confident that the photos did indeed show an Australian Tern.

Although the following day I had a busy schedule, this was enough to spur me to make a short space in my diary around midday and skip lunch. I arrived at a spot overlooking the wetlands in the stifling midday heat. I waited for half an hour or so but saw no terns. I tried a couple of other spots with the same result. Then a longer drive to an area overlooking the beach, but I drew another blank. I decided to drive back to the original spot for a final cursory look before heading home. On my final scan with the binoculars, I picked up a distant large tern in flight. Switching to the camera I fired off some shots and then checked the back of the camera. The bill proportions looked promising, but I needed to get closer.

I managed to get to roughly the area where I had last seen it and waited. After a short wait the bird reappeared (Plate 2). It was quartering the prawn ponds, and at times came too close to get it all in the frame. The bird was evidently doing a large circuit of the whole area. After spending about 10 minutes quartering the pond where I was, it flew off to the further end of the ponds from me. Because I had to rush off to another appointment, and as I felt I had enough photos to 'nail' the identification, I did not wait for it to come around on its next lap. As I was travelling the following few days, I did not get chance to visit the area again until 8th May, by which time the bird had evidently moved on.

Although Australian Tern in Basic (non-breeding) plumage has a distinctive head pattern which sets it apart from Gull-billed Terns, according to published literature, Australian Tern in Alternate (breeding) plumage can only be differentiated from Gull-billed Tern by their overall larger size, thicker, longer bill with a more strongly curved culmen, paler grey upperparts, whiter upper tail and longer legs.

My first impressions of the bird as being large-billed were confirmed by my views on 19 April, but since it was the only tern at the location, making comparisons with Gull-billed Terns was difficult, especially as I viewed the bird in very strong overhead sunlight, and I only ever saw it in flight.



Plate 2: Australian Tern, Kuala Baram Wetlands, 19 April 2025. Note the heavy bill, strongly decurved culmen and weak gonys. The tail appears white and the wings pale grey, though this is difficult to judge due to the strong midday sunlight.

Even though I was confident that the bird was an Australian Tern, being certain enough that I had enough evidence to submit the sighting as a potential first national record required some additional research. I was thankful that I had obtained a series of good photos, and using these, was able to make extensive comparisons with photos of Australian and Gull-billed Terns available on eBird. In addition to the features mentioned above, I felt that the bird differed structurally from Gull-billed Tern in being longer-necked and broader-winged than that species (Plate 3). After concluding my research, I felt confident enough to submit the record and it was accepted unanimously by the MNS BCC Records Committee. My photos of the bird can be seen at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S227190380>.

If anything can be learned from this experience, I suppose it is that

- a. It is worth preparing oneself ahead of time by learning about potential rarities which might turn up.
- b. Regularly watching a 'local patch' gives the best chance of coming across an unusual visitor.
- c. Always look carefully – don't dismiss a familiar-looking bird too quickly!



Adult Australian Tern, 19 Apr 2025



Appears
broader-winged
and longer-necked
than Gull-billed

Adult Gull-billed Tern, 5 Jun 2023



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Plate 3: Comparison between the Australian Tern at Kuala Baram Wetlands and a Gull-billed Tern seen at the same locality in 2023.

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