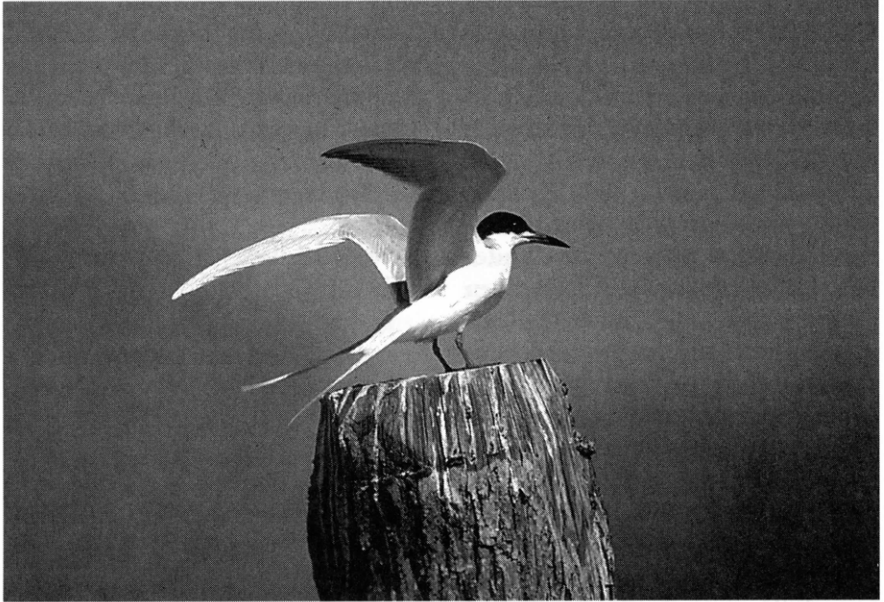


Photo Quiz

Bob Curry



This white bird with long, slender, pointed wings and a forked tail, standing on a post, is clearly a tern. The bill is comparatively slender, with an unpronounced gonydeal angle. This, in combination with the light coloured legs, eliminates the larger terns such as Caspian, Royal and Sandwich. The Least Tern has a white forehead in all plumages, and the *Chlidonias* terns (Black, White-winged and Whiskered) are much duskier birds. To say that we are left with the intermediate *Sterna* terns is no small utterance, as these are among the most difficult identification challenges facing observers.

The four Nearctic species involved are Arctic, Common, Forster's and Roseate. Common Tern is widespread throughout Ontario, while Arctic breeds along the north coast, and Forster's in the large marshes of the extreme south and southwest of the province. Roseate must be considered in these deliberations; although it seems not to be doing well on its East Coast breeding grounds, it remains a possibility for Ontario.

With terns, establishing the age of the bird is paramount to correct identification. This bird has a solid black cap and lacks any duskiess

in the contour (body) feathering which might suggest immaturity. Nor does it have any blackish areas on the upper surface of the primaries which, in most species, occurs as a result of feather wear in late summer and is a precursor to the prebasic molt. Thus, this is an adult medium-sized *Sterna* tern in definitive alternate (adult breeding) plumage.

Some of the difficulties of tern identification are exacerbated when, as in this case, there is but one bird, precluding comparison with others. Nevertheless, based upon our memory pictures of thousands of terns, this bird seems rather lanky. The outer retrices are long; we can imagine that if the wings were folded up, these tail feathers would extend beyond-beyond their tips. In addition, the bill and legs seem rather long, and at the same time, quite stout even for these close congeners.

A persistent problem complicating tern identification involves light conditions. In bright sunshine and especially with dazzling reflection off water, subtle shades of grey will be bleached out. Conversely, underwings and bellies in dull light or in shadow can appear darker than they really are. Nevertheless, this bird seems bright white, particularly on the underparts, and the upper surface of the right wing is gleaming white; it is a lighter shade than the upper wing coverts and there is no black on the outer pri-

maries. The underside of the left wing reveals dark grey along the trailing edge of the primaries. The rump is whiter than the tail, and the outer web of the left outer retrix, which is directly facing us, is white.

Arctic Tern is the easiest of the four to eliminate. It has a shorter, more slender but straighter bill, with less downcurve to the culmen. It can have a little black at the bill tip, but this would not extend nearly as far towards the base as it does on the quiz bird. Arctic has a smaller, more rounded head and much shorter legs. Overall, it is a much greyer bird with no contrast on the dorsal surface of the wing, a fine black margin along the trailing edge of the underprimaries and much greyer underparts. The outer web of the outer tail feather is blackish.

Except for a short period when it is feeding chicks, Roseate Tern has a mostly blackish bill which is considerably more slender than on this bird. Hence, a Roseate in Ontario would almost certainly have an entirely dusky bill. The outer two primaries on the upperwing are boldly black, and the trailing edge of the underside of the wing is translucent, unlike the greyish trailing edge on this bird.

Our quiz bird is a **Forster's Tern**. Common and Forster's are the two species found regularly in southern Ontario and the two most likely to be confused. Common is grey on the breast and belly, whereas Forster's is white. But remember

the caveat about bright light. In the older field guides, much is made of bill and leg colour differences – more reddish in Common and more orange in Forster's. While this may frequently hold, do not rely on soft-part colours, which may vary from bird to bird. Just as well, inasmuch as we're dealing with a black and white photograph! Remaining with these parts, however, the bill on Common Tern is not so long or as stout as on this bird, and the legs are slightly shorter. The distal black on the bill on average extends farther towards the base on Forster's, as in this bird. The wing and tail proportions on Common Tern are different; the wings are longer (remember that Common is a much longer distance migrant than Forster's, which mostly winters in North America) and the tail shorter, so that the latter does not extend beyond the folded wingtips. In definitive alternate plumage, the upperwings in these two species are diagnostic. Unlike this bird, Common Tern shows a contrast between blackish outer primaries and paler inner ones. This is, however, less noticeable in spring and may

be difficult to discern on flying birds in bright light. However, it would certainly show as a dark wedge in the middle of the wing on a standing Common Tern, unlike the entirely flashing white wing in the photo. Again, the earlier guides discuss differences in the tail. I find this very difficult to determine in flying birds, but on this bird the white outer web of the outer tail feather serves to distinguish it from Common as, in this pose frozen by the camera, the outer edge of the tail would be blackish in Common.

It is instructive to closely study standing terns. There is, for instance, a subtle difference in the black caps of these two species. In Common, the lower edge of the cap is straight whereas in Forster's there is a slight downward bulge just below the eye, as seen in this bird. Moreover, the white wedge between the black cap and the gape is longer and broader in Forster's. Look for this in spring and note that the quiz bird has a broad white wedge.

This Forster's Tern in definitive alternate plumage was photographed by Michael Runtz at Sturgeon Creek, Leamington, in May 1982.

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