

Articles

White-winged Tern: New to Ontario

by

Y. Robert Tymstra

At about 1800 h on 8 May 1991, John Raven and I arrived at the Port Lambton sewage lagoons, Lambton County, Ontario. Several terns and gulls were hovering over the two nearly full ponds as we crested the dike and began our scan. A noisy flock of about 125 Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*) hovered over the rectangular lagoons. To my surprise and delight, mixed in with the terns were at least three adult Little Gulls (*Larus minutus*) in breeding plumage. Two of these appeared to be paired and I relayed to John my hopes that they would breed at Walpole Island.

I scanned the Black Terns more carefully and found among them two Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*) and six Bonaparte's Gulls (*L. philadelphia*). I remember thinking what a pleasing array the gulls and terns presented: all of the birds were some variation of black, grey, and white, flying against a grey overcast sky. Suddenly, another permutation of these colours caught my eye. One of the "Black Terns" had pale wings instead of the usual slaty-black and it sported a flashy white rump and tail. When the wings were in their upstroke, I noticed stark black wing-linings contrasting with pale grey primaries and secondaries. Although I immediately recognized it as a White-winged Tern (*C. leucopterus*), I was incredulous at first.

I raced back to the car to get my camera, looking briefly at a field guide to confirm my identification. When I returned to photograph the bird, I could not immediately relocate it (and just as there are few things more pleasurable than finding a new bird for the province, there is nothing more horrifying than not being able to document it). My fears were allayed, however, when I rediscovered it a minute later. I photographed the tern as it circled the north lagoon in an oval pattern, coming as close as 15 m.

After studying it for about fifteen minutes, we left the lagoons to notify the birding community. Four local birders managed to see it before dark and hundreds more descended upon the lagoons in subsequent days.

It ranged more widely during the following days, and in addition to continuing to frequent the Port Lambton lagoons, was spotted at the Sombra sewage lagoons 6 km to the north, and at least once over the St. Clair River north of Walpole Island. It was last seen on 12 May by Jon L. Dunn *et al.* at Port Lambton (not to 14 May as published by Ridout, 1992).

A White-winged Tern, presumably the same bird, showed up a few days later at Long Point, Ontario. On 15 May, Tim Sabo heard

a call reminiscent of a Little Gull at Big Creek National Wildlife Area, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M., and looked up to see a White-winged Tern. It was subsequently observed by dozens of people in fairly open cat-tail marsh enclosed by berms, and was seen until the evening of 19 May (Tim Sabo, pers. comm.).

Description and Behaviour

The bird was easy to spot among the dozens of uniformly dark Black Terns with which it was flying. The pale wing-linings and slaty upper wing surfaces of the Black Terns were almost a negative image of the White-winged Tern's wing pattern. The latter species' black wing-linings and axillaries contrasted strongly with its light grey secondaries and tertiaries. The primaries were silvery-grey with the outer feathers edged black. The bold white leading edge of the inner forewing was prominent in flight.

The head, neck, and underparts to the vent and flanks were jet black. Its black mantle blended into a duller sooty black on the lower back. In bright contrast, its lower vent, under tail-coverts, tail and rump were snowy white. Its bill was black.

It seemed somewhat stockier and shorter than the Black Terns. Harrison (1983) states that both species have similar length and wingspan but the slimmer build, longer bill, and proportionally longer, more pointed wings and tail of the Black Tern make the shorter-billed White-winged Tern appear heavier and larger bodied.

In flight, the White-winged Tern seemed more purposeful and less buoyant than the Black Terns, with shallower, more powerful wing beats.

Cramp (1985) says the White-winged Tern has a "flight of similar style to *C. niger* but its shallower wing-beats produce (a) rather steadier track". During the period of first sighting it continually flew an oval track inside the circumference of one of the lagoons, occasionally hovering and dipping to pick insects from the water's surface. Unlike the noisy Black Terns, it was silent.

Although it flew with the Black Tern flock, its motions seemed quite independent of its companions; no interaction between the two species was observed. In the Palearctic, the White-winged Tern is a sociable species that commonly mixes with Black Terns and Whiskered Terns (*C. hybrida*) during migration and for feeding (Cramp 1985).

At Long Point, Tim Sabo observed the tern aggressively courting Black Terns, carrying minnows and "churring" as it flew. Sabo said it was an efficient and skilled feeder, successfully catching a fish on every observed attempt.

Distribution and Extralimital Records

The White-winged Tern is an Old World species, breeding on inland marshes from Hungary east across Asia to central Russia and southern China. It has made attempts at breeding recently in France, Germany, Belgium, and Sweden (Harrison 1983). Most Eurasian populations winter in central and southern Africa while Asian breeders move to southeast Asia and northern Australia. A few winter in west African coastal areas and perhaps these birds may be the main source of North American records. They are

numerous in Senegal and abundant in the upper Niger region in Mali during the winter months (Cramp 1985).

The White-winged Tern has been recorded more than three dozen times in North America. Its first documented occurrence on the continent was a bird seen at Lake Koshkonong, Wisconsin on 5 July 1873 (Bent 1921). After an absence of almost a century, a White-winged Tern was found at Chincoteague NWR, Virginia in 1963 and has since been recorded almost annually in various east coast locations with dates ranging from 8 May to 17 September. Other individuals have been recorded in Indiana, Vermont, New York, Alaska, and the West Indies. A list of records appears in Table 1.

The first Canadian record was a bird at Grand Point, Grand Lake, Queen's County, New Brunswick on 27-30 July 1968 (Godfrey 1986). Since then, the White-winged Tern has appeared at four other New Brunswick locations and annually at Saint-Gédéon, Quebec, from 1985-1987. The Quebec bird, a female, successfully mated with a Black Tern producing three offspring in 1985 (Yank and Aubry 1985). There is a possible sight record from Newfoundland.

Discussion

The field marks observed were classic for White-winged Tern in definitive alternate (adult breeding) plumage. Sexes are similar but females tend to have less gloss on the head, scapulars and underparts are slightly tinged slate-grey, and often have varying amounts of light grey wash on the tail (Cramp 1985). The Ontario bird's clean black-and-white

plumage and aggressive behaviour at Long Point would seem to indicate that it was a male.

In breeding season, the White-winged Tern's bill is usually dark red or black with a crimson tinge (Cramp 1985). Apparently 10-15% of White-winged Terns in full alternate plumage have solid black bills instead of red (*vide* Paul Holt, *via* Jon L. Dunn, pers. comm.). Both the Port Lambton and Long Point birds had dark bills and, considering the proximity of locations and dates, are likely the same bird.

Much discussion has taken place as to its possible origins. Boyle *et al.* (1989) speculate that White-winged Terns reach North America after joining up with Black Terns of North American origin on wintering grounds off the west African coast. Certainly the strong Guinea and North Equatorial currents, with prevailing flows from east to west, could assist birds in their move towards the Americas. This could account for the predominance of spring and summer records along the east coast of North America. A Siberian source is unlikely given the early date and distance involved.

The only late fall records are from the West Indies. It is interesting to speculate about the destinations of southbound North American White-winged Terns. Do they return to Africa or spend the winter on the South American coasts with Black Terns? (The White-winged Tern has not yet been recorded from South America).

In North America, some birds have exhibited remarkable site-fidelity. Some of the Chincoteague, Virginia, and Little Creek, Delaware

Table 1: North American Records of White-winged Tern.

| Dates | Location | Source |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Canada | | |
| 1968 27-30 July | Grand Pt., Grand L., Queen's County, N.B. | (Godfrey 1986) |
| 1971 23-26 May | McGowan's Corner, N.B. | (Finch 1971:707) |
| 1971 6-10 July | Portobello Creek, Sunbury County, N.B. | (Finch 1971:835) |
| 1976 19 August | Miscou Island, N.B. | (Godfrey 1986) |
| 1985 30 May-summer | Saint-Gédéon, Quebec | (Yank and Aubry 1985) |
| 1986 18 May-summer | Saint-Gédéon, Quebec | (Yank and Aubry 1986) |
| 1987 26 May-6 June | Saint-Gédéon, Quebec | (Yank <i>et al.</i> 1987) |
| 1988 16 June | St. Paul's, Nfld. (possible sight record) | (Mactavish 1988) |
| 1988 9 July | Cap Pele, N.B. | (Mactavish 1988) |
| West Indies | | |
| ? | Great Inagua, Bahamas | (AOU 1983) |
| 1888 24 October | Barbados | (Bent 1921) |
| 1986 Fall | St. Croix | (Norton 1987) |
| Northwest | | |
| 1976 12 July | Nizki Island, Aleutians, Alaska | (Gibson and Byrd 1976) |
| Inland U.S. | | |
| 1873 5 July | Lake Koshkonong, Wisconsin | (Bent 1921) |
| 1979 17 July | Gary, Indiana | (Kleen 1979) |
| 1987 12 June | White River Junction, Vermont | (Kibbe 1987) |
| 1991 19 June | Rochester, New York | (Paxton <i>et al.</i> 1991) |
| East Coast U.S. | | |
| 1963 16 May-early Aug. | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Kain 1987) |
| 1963 11-18 July | Salisbury, Massachusetts | (Bagg and Emery 1963) |
| 1964 16 May-9 Aug. | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Kain 1987) |
| 1965 8-30 May | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Kain 1987) |
| 1974 7 July-Sept. | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Scott and Cutler 1974) |
| 1974 13 July-17 Sept. | Little Creek, Delaware | (Scott and Cutler 1975) |
| 1975 10 July-27 Aug. | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Scott 1975, 1976) |
| 1977 24 July-Aug. | Little Creek, Delaware | (Buckley <i>et al.</i> 1977, 1978) |
| 1977 15 Sept. | Jekyll Island, Georgia | (LeGrand 1979) |
| 1978 19 July-late Aug. | Little Creek, Delaware | (Smith <i>et al.</i> 1978) |
| 1980 7-17 July | Chincoteague NWR, Virginia | (Armistead 1980) |
| 1980 19 July | Little Creek, Delaware | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1980) |
| 1983 10 May | South Cape Hook, New Jersey | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1983) |
| 1983 17 May | Sandy Hook, New Jersey | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1983) |
| 1987 11-19 July | Little Creek, Delaware | (Paxton <i>et al.</i> 1987) |
| 1988 30 July-28 Aug. | Ted Harvey WMA, Delaware | (Paxton <i>et al.</i> 1988) |
| 1989 4-10 June | Cape May, New Jersey | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1989) |
| 17 July-Aug. | | |
| 1989 23 July-Aug. | Bombay Hook, Delaware | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1989) |
| 1990 22-29 July | Little Creek, Delaware | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1990) |
| 1991 12 May | Cedar Beach, New York | (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1991) |

terns have returned to the same ponds repeatedly and one returned to St. Gédéon, Quebec three years in a row. From 7-8 May 1992, a White-winged Tern again appeared at the lagoons at Port Lambton and Sombra, Ontario, almost exactly a year after the first sighting. Dennis Rupert said it had jet black primaries and crisper colours than the previous year's bird and described its call as a softer, less harsh version of the Black Tern's. On 2 June, a White-winged Tern was seen at Windermere Basin, Hamilton, Ontario. (The 1991 records were submitted to the Ontario Bird Records Committee and have been accepted, but 1992 sightings are awaiting review).

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Green Violet-ear: First for Canada

by
Nick Escott

As Bird Records Chairman of the Thunder Bay Field Naturalist Club, I occasionally receive reports of birds unexpected in our area, some of which turn out to be false alarms. So when a club member phoned on the evening of 2 July 1991 reporting a Green Violet-ear (*Colibri thalassinus*) at a local feeder, I was skeptical. Nevertheless, I knew the bird must be something unusual, since it was said to be quite different from the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), the only regular hummingbird in our area.

I went immediately to the location of the sighting, a home on the outskirts of Kakabeka Falls. This is a town on the Trans-Canada Highway about a half-hour drive west of Thunder Bay on the north-west shore of Lake Superior. The area is characterized by rolling hills covered by mixed coniferous and deciduous forest, at the northern edge

of the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Forest Region. There are some clearings occupied by scattered farms and rural homes. The house where the rare hummingbird had been seen had a fairly large open garden, with stands of tall jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) at various distances in all directions, giving the area a decidedly coniferous look, somewhat reminiscent of Mexico's highland pine forests.

The homeowner, Bob Broome, had first seen the bird Sunday, 30 June, at his hummingbird feeder, which was hanging under the eaves of the house, in front of the kitchen window. His sister-in-law, Ellen Stewart, subsequently observed the bird, identified it as a Green Violet-ear using her National Geographic Field Guide, and phoned me.

I met Bob and Ellen on my arrival, and we waited until dark, but all we saw was a Ruby-throated