

The prominent black cap, sharp pointed bill, slender pointed wings, and forked tail at once mark this month's puzzler as a tern. Four species of medium-sized, black-capped terns regularly occur in Massachusetts: Roseate, Common, Arctic, and Forster's. Three other superficially similar tern species (Caspian, Royal, and Least terns) need not be considered because of the larger size, broader wings, much heavier bill, and less deeply forked tail of the Caspian and Royal terns, and the conspicuous white forehead of the tiny Least Tern.

Distinguishing between Roseate, Common, Arctic, and Forster's terns is more challenging. The pictured tern has a complete black cap and hence has to be an adult in breeding plumage. Also, because the bill shows a distinct dark tip, the primaries do not have a neat, thin dark line on the trailing edge, and the outer edges of the outer tail feathers are white, the mystery tern cannot be an Arctic Tern, which has a blood-red bill and a different under-primary and tail pattern.

The Roseate Tern in breeding plumage can similarly be eliminated because it is a strikingly pale species with a bill that is usually mostly dark, an underwing pattern that usually shows only a thin dark line on the leading edge of the wing (created by dusky webs on the first two or three primaries), and exceptionally long, pure white tail streamers.

Common and Forster's terns remain. Both species have bicolored bills in breeding plumage and are overall quite similar in shape and proportions. Although Forster's Terns have a frostier look to their primaries and do not show the intrusion of a dusky wedge into the outer primaries, a characteristic of Common Terns in flight, these features are not able to be reliably assessed in the tern depicted. However, the fact that the mystery tern clearly has white outer edges to the outer tail streamers at once confirms the identity of the unidentified sternid as a Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*). In Common Terns these feather edges are gray.



The Forster's Tern occurs in Massachusetts as a regular late summer and fall visitor in varying numbers, and since at least 1990, one to two pairs have nested at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. The pictured bird was photographed in the Mid-Atlantic states by Simon Perkins.

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Hugo H. Schroder. Courtesy of MAS.



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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