

### American and European Tern Calls

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In a paper published in *The Auk*, Lynn Moseley (1979) documented vocal recognition between members of pairs of Least Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) by playback experiments. I do not question Moseley's work (it confirmed by experimental means what many tern researchers have already experienced in the field), but I do question her use of the basic call of the European Little Tern as her frame of reference. The call, phoneticized as "Purrit-tit-tit" by Schönert (1961), bears no relationship to the basic call of the American Least Tern, phoneticized variously as a four-figure call by Hardy (1957), Davis (1968), and Wolk (1974), and visualized as a sound spectrogram in Moseley's paper. Sound spectrograms of the calls of both the American and European terns appeared in a paper I wrote (1976) on vocal differences between the two. The differences were so marked that it appeared unlikely that the European Little Tern and the American Least Tern were conspecific.

I would like, therefore, to correct the erroneous assumption made in the Moseley paper that the basic calls of these two groups of birds can be equated.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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### Response

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Massey is correct that, if the European Little Tern and American Least Tern represent two distinct species, terminology for their vocalizations should not be identical. Massey's opinion that the Little Tern and Least Tern are separate species, however, has not yet been accepted by the A.O.U. Checklist Committee. When my article was written, Schönert's paper [1961, *Zur Brutbiologie und Ethologie der Zwergseeschwalbe (Sterna albifrons albifrons Pallas)*. Pp. 131-187 in *Beiträge zur Kenntnis deutscher Vogel* (H. S. Schildmacher, Ed.). Jena, Gustav Fischer Verlag] contained the most complete description of vocalizations for *Sterna albifrons*, and I deemed it appropriate to accept his terminology. I felt that it was important to follow the standard ethological practice of giving a descriptive rather than a functional name to vocalizations and displays.

My work with Least Terns has shown considerable variability in vocalizations of the east coast population. In fact, some of my sonagrams of Least Tern vocalizations closely resemble Massey's (1976, *Auk* 93: 760) Little Tern calls. Schönert also emphasized the individual variation in Little Tern calls. It remains to be shown statistically that the variance between populations significantly exceeds that within populations.

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