

First record of Snowy-crowned Tern (*Sterna trudeaui*) for Peru

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ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1978, while birding at the Bay of Paracas, Department of Ica, on the Pacific Coast of Peru, about 240 km south of Lima, the authors discovered a suspect, medium-sized *Sterna* tern. At the time, the bird was thought to be a Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) the authors not being aware of the similarity between Forster's and Snowy-crowned Tern (*Sterna trudeaui*) in basic plumage. We observed the bird both sitting and in flight for about fifteen minutes. Three inferior color slides of the bird were obtained.

Subsequently, after returning to the United States, the great similarity between these two species in basic plumage came to our attention. After consulting the available literature, our own inconclusive slides, and specimens of the two species in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Comparative Zoology, we concluded that the bird in question could not be identified with certainty.

This unsatisfactory situation was resolved, when on August 27, 1979, we returned to the Bay of Paracas and were fortunate in locating another (?) individual in almost the exact spot where the 1978 bird was observed. On this occasion, we were able to see the critical field marks and to positively identify the bird as a basic-plumaged Snowy-crowned Tern. Moreover, during the remainder of that day, and through the next, we sighted two more individuals in areas up to 7 km from the original location. We were successful in obtaining identifiable color slides of the bird to corroborate our observations.

These birds, or other individuals of this species, were still present in the vicinity of the Bay of Paracas in mid-September (Victor Emanuel pers. comm.) and in late September (Bruce Sorrie, pers. comm.).

The Snowy-crowned Tern is an enigmatic species. Its normal range is from Rio de Janeiro in southeastern Brazil, south to Buenos Aires in northern Argentina on the Atlantic Coast of the continent, and from Aconcagua south to Llanquihue, Chile, on the Pacific Coast. There are casual records as far south as Chubut, Argentina, and the Straits of Magellan, according to Blake's *Manual of Neotropical Birds*, vol. 1 (1977). Amazingly, the type specimen of the species was reported by Audubon as being off Cape May, New Jersey — an incredible record considering the species' limited distribution in southern South America. The New Jersey record is accepted by the A.O.U. (*Check-list*, 1957) on the word of Audubon, but little further information regarding it seems to be available in the literature. Some authors have questioned the validity of the record, but it is difficult to reach a conclusion from such meagre evidence. The nearest locality to the Bay of Paracas from which Snowy-crowned Tern has been reported is Arica in northern Chile, ca. 800 km south, but Johnson in his *Birds of Chile* (1965) regards this record with suspicion.

ALTHOUGH FORSTER'S and Snowy-crowned terns differ dramatically in alternate plumage, the similarity between these two species in basic plumage can be striking. The two most important points of distinction between the two species are the presence or absence of a yellow tip to the bill and the coloration of the nape. Snowy-crowned Tern has the apical 5-6 mm of its black bill tipped with yellow, and either a white or very pale gray nape. Both marks were plainly noted on the Paracas bird. Forster's Tern has an all-black bill, and generally a well-marked dusky collar. These two characters seem

to remain constant within each species, but there is considerable overlap among other characters only in basic plumage. We believe overall body size, bill size and shape, mantle color and ventral coloration are all very similar in the two species. Snowy-crowned Tern is alleged to be the shorter-tailed of the two species. On the specimens of Snowy-crowned Terns examined, the tip of the tail fell short of the folded wing-tips by up to 38 mm. However, although the tip of the tail on some specimens of Forster's Terns extended beyond the folded wing-tips by about 19 mm, it also fell up to 25 mm short of the wing-tips on others. The dark ear patch tends to be a bit lighter in color and slightly less extensive in the Snowy-crowned Tern, but this character also seems variable. Forster's Tern tends to have more silvery on the tips and outer webs of the primaries, with Snowy-crowned being more dark brownish or blackish in those areas, but, once again, the feature is variable. With these facts in mind, the authors feel that the colors of the bill and nape must be critically observed to make a positive field identification.

The Bay of Paracas has been relatively well-covered by birders in recent years, at least during the austral winter months of June through September, and it is difficult to imagine that this species has been long overlooked there. Although these are the first records of the species for Peru, with the one probable individual in 1978, and up to three individuals in 1979, it seems plausible to think that perhaps this species may be extending its range into this area during the non-breeding season.

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