IDENTIFICATION OF THE COMMON TERN AND THE ARCTIC TERN*

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[The Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and the Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* present a very difficult problem of identification. Observers in California do not have at hand adequate information on the subject. We asked Mr. Vande Weghe for permission to publish in this journal a translation of the part of his paper "La Sterne pierregarin *Sterna hirundo* et la Sterne arctique *Sterna paradisaea*. Identification et Passage en Belgique" (Aves 3: 1-5, 1966) that pertains to field identification (the rest of the paper treats the status in Belgium).

Nine species of terns are regularly seen in California. They are conveniently classified in five groups. (1) The large terns – Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*, Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*, and Elegant Tern *Thalasseus elegans* are easily separated from the others by their large size and their red or orange bill color; identification of the individual species presents no particularly difficult problem. (2) The fairly large, thick black-billed Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* which is confined to the Salton Sea area. (3) The dark Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* which is always easily identified by its plumage color. (4) The very small Least Tern *Sterna albifrons* which is easily identified by its size. (5) The medium sized terns – Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*, Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*, and Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*. In this group Forster's Tern is reasonably easy to separate from the other two, though the identification is delicate and requires great care. Though it is quite beyond the scope of this article to discuss it in detail, we suggest the following guide lines:

(1) A bird showing dark shoulder patches is a young Common/Arctic Tern.

(2) A bird without shoulder patches, and showing no contrast between back and rump in flight (general whiteness) is an adult Forster's Tern.

(3) Both adult Common/Arctic and young Forster's lack shoulder patches and display a contrast between white rump and darker back; young Forster's are best distinguished by the brownish edgings on the back as well as the black tips to the outer three or four tail feathers.

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(4) In every plumage except breeding adult, Forster's Tern has a diagnostic head pattern; a black ear patch, limited to the auriculars, and curving downwards toward the rear. The head patch of the Common Tern (when it has a white forehead) curves upwards to include the nape.

In California the Common Tern is a regular spring and fall migrant along the coast but appears to have a limited number of regular stopping points where it is common. It also occurs inland during the fall, especially at the Salton Sea. There are a few winter records for coastal Southern California. Records also span the entire summer season, but there is no evidence of breeding.

During the spring the Common Tern appears to be confined to the coast and offshore waters. Spring migrants first appear in coastal Southern California during the last week of April and are most numerous during the first two weeks of May. Small numbers are still found until the end of May, and stragglers have been recorded during June.

Fall migrants appear early, and the first are usually in California by the first week of July. Numbers reach a peak during September and early October, and fair numbers persist in coastal Southern California until early November. A few regularly stay in coastal Southern California until late December, and individuals have remained through the winter on San Diego Bay. During the fall Common Terns occur inland in limited numbers as well as being fairly numerous along the coast, and they have been recorded from such localities as Lake Almanor, Lake Tahoe (regular), Mendota, Victorville, the Salton Sea (regular flocks of up to 100), and along the Colorado River from Needles to Yuma.

Along the coast the Common Tern appears to prefer the larger bays, and it also appears to be more numerous in Southern California.

The Arctic Tern is an offshore migrant during the fall; it is highly pelagic, seldom, if ever, occurring near the shore. There are unverified reports of small flocks during May far off the coast of Southern California, and there is one specimen, from Laguna Beach, which cannot be found. During the fall it is fairly numerous off the coast from August until October, with records from July 27 to October 14.

We are grateful to Mr. Vande Weghe for permission to translate his paper and MM. van Groenendael and Dobrski for allowing us to reproduce the photographs which illustrated Mr. Vande Weghe's paper. We also wish to thank the editors of Aves for their cooperation. – Eds.]

IDENTIFICATION OF COMMON AND ARCTIC TERNS

Four species of Terns can be observed annually in Belgium. The Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* and the Least Tern *Sterna albifrons* do not present any difficulty of identification, and with some practice they can be easily recognized even at a great distance.

A very different situation prevails, unfortunately, for our two red-billed species: the Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and the Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*. Even the experienced observer with a wide knowledge of seabirds is often unable to make an exact identification. The reason for this is that very few ornithologists know the true diagnostic characters and can evaluate them correctly in the field. Moreover, these birds are often seen at a great distance, briefly, or in poor light.

The detailed descriptions found in standard guides and handbooks are generally of very little value for the field observer. At most, one finds the characters that separate the two species on the ground.

Thus we learn that the bill of the Arctic Tern is shorter and all red, that its tail is longer, and that its legs are shorter. It is, however, very difficult to judge the length of the legs on an isolated bird in the field since it depends largely on the way in which the bird has arranged its breast and belly feathers. Moreover, I have never seen an Arctic Tern on the ground in Belgium.

Therefore it is mostly in flight that the two species must be separated. In this case three groups of characters can be used. First, it appears that the silhouette of the Arctic Tern is slightly, though clearly, different from that of the Common Tern. The Arctic Tern has the bill and the head, thus the whole part of the body situated in front of the wings, much shorter than the part situated behind the wings, which includes the rump and tail; the ratio is 1 to 2.5 or 3 in the Arctic Tern compared to 1 to 1.5 or 2 in the Common Tern (see photographs 1 and 2). In addition, if the bird is close enough, one can see that the bill itself is much shorter, which gives the head a more rounded appearance (see photographs 1, 3, and 5).

The second important character is the transparency of the wings. This comes from the fact that the secondaries (especially the external secondaries) and the primaries are much whiter and less powdered with light gray in the Arctic Tern than in the Common Tern. Thus, there is a wide transparent triangle visible on the underwings when the observer is looking up at the bird, and a long whitish triangle contrasting with the gray coverts visible on the upper-wings (see photographs 3 and 4). The rectrices, especially the external rectrices, are also

much whiter in the Arctic Tern, hence its general appearance is much whiter than that of the Common Tern (see photographs 3 and 4). With wear and molt this difference is most marked during the fall.

The third character is the voice. As far as I am concerned this in itself can be diagnostic. The Arctic Tern has a complete series of calls different from those of the Common Tern, but most are heard only on the breeding grounds and are therefore of little value to an observer in Belgium. One, however, is important and is heard regularly during migration; this a fine "keeh. . . keeh. . . keeh. . .", soft, short, clear, and often repeated a few times. The corresponding call of the Common Tern is a longer, lower-pitched, more nasal "krre" which includes rather different tones. To know these calls it is necessary to hear them a few times, but once learned they are not easily forgotten.

Many observers try to identify the Arctic Tern by the all red bill. This character has value only in the spring and on the breeding grounds. Indeed, in the summer and fall, beginning as early as July, the bills of both species become increasingly black. It is only in the spring, and then only when the bird can be seen at very close range in excellent light, that the absense of a black tip to the bill can be a help in confirming identification. This point, however, is never conclusive by itself since some Common Terns lack the black bill tip.

In general, the characters that I have described are not very clear-cut, and one will not identify a passing Arctic Tern in a flock of Common Terns on the first try. On the contrary, only after seeing several birds, and after learning how to evaluate the various characters according to the distance, the light, the sky, the color and state of the ocean, the manner of flight of the birds, and the angle of observation, will one succeed in making a positive identification. It must be admitted that, even for the best observer, some birds must go unidentified. In these cases it is best to put the bird down as "*Sterna species*" or to use the British term "Commic Tern" derived from the words Common and Arctic.

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