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FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF DIFFICULT BIRDS: II
FOUR SIMILAR TERNS

Allen D. Cruickshank

Along the Atlantic Coast of the United States there are 4 rather similar medium-sized terns in the genus *Sterna* that some observers find difficult to identify. All 4 species are similar in size, depending on age, sex, and season, and some overlap in characteristics surely occurs. An analysis of the diagnostic field marks, however, reveals that most individuals can be identified accurately at a reasonable range.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradiseae*) Accidental along the U.S. Atlantic coast south of New England. Since only one positive U.S. record exists (New Jersey) south of Long Island, Florida observers can dismiss this species from their minds. The fact that for a brief period in autumn some Common Terns have a pure red bill accounts for periodic, and probably erroneous, reports of this species south of New York.

Adult: Mostly gray-white with pearl gray mantle and black cap. Grayer than Common or Forster's Terns, but this characteristic unreliable due to varying effects of light. By far the best field mark is the fact that the bill is blood-red to the tip, and usually noticeably shorter than in similar species. In some lights a white streak just below the black cap is noticeable (in Common Terns the face seems light). Since the tarsi of the Arctic Tern are shorter, this species stands noticeably lower than the neighboring Common Terns. The tail of the Arctic Tern is longer, generally projecting slightly beyond the wing tips when at rest. Voice: angry "kee-arr," slightly higher pitched and less drawn out than in Common Terns. An occasional "kee, kee" with a rising inflection is generally distinctive.

Immature and winter: Immature birds are virtually indistinguishable in the field from immature Common Terns. Autumn adults are not easily identified either, as the bill and feet become quite dusky.

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) Normally this is the only truly common (occasionally abundant) and widely distributed medium-sized tern throughout Peninsular Florida for most of the year. At times it is common even on

lakes, ponds, and marshes in the interior. Although a few non-breeding birds occur in summer, it is essentially a transient and winter visitant, mostly from July or early August to early April. Major flights are obvious along the coasts in September and early October; less pronounced northward flights occur during March and early April.

Adult: Very similar to Common Tern. Mostly white with pearl-gray mantle, black cap, straw-orange bill with black tip, and straw-red feet. The frosty wing tips (usually whiter than the mantle) are the best field mark (Common Tern has dusky wing tips). It must be stressed that the tail in many adult Forster's Terns extends much farther beyond the wing tips than it does in many Roseate Terns. Tail deeply forked, pale gray with white margin (reverse in Common Tern), but this margin character is often difficult to determine in the field. Voice: a harsh nasal "churr," and a rapid "kik-kik-kik."

Immature and winter: Normally a distinct black patch on each side of the head through eye and ear (not joined across back of head as in Common Tern). This and the frosty wing tips are sufficient for accurate identification. The bill is generally blackish, the feet dusky to yellowish. The dusky patch on the forepart of the wing in the immature Common Tern is absent in Forster's, although there is generally some dusky in the primaries in immatures.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) The small breeding colony on Bush Key (Dry Tortugas), mentioned by Howell in Florida Bird Life, disappeared in 1937. Contrary to what many believe, this species is normally uncommon over most of Florida during migrations and is rare in winter (mid-August to mid-April). The main southward migration (small numbers beginning early July; mostly mid-August to early November) is generally far off the Atlantic shore and is recorded only by observers out on deep-sea fishing boats during this period. Occasionally in migration during wild easterly gales or hurricanes great numbers are blown onto the Florida Peninsula, and then may appear in numbers even on inland lakes. The spring flight from early April to mid-May is generally light, and in some years goes unrecorded.

Adult: Very similar to Forster's Tern, but bill carmine (not straw-orange) with black tip. Wing tips dusky, not frosty; outer black edgings on tail frequently obvious (reverse in Forster's). Voice: generally sounds angry; a descending, drawn-out "kee-arr," also a rapid "kik-kik-kik" as in Forster's.

Immature and winter: The black patch on each side of head through the eye and ear continues around the back of head and joins on the nape (widely separated in Forster's). In immatures there is normally considerable black on the nape, and a diagnostic black patch shows on the forepart of the wing (absent in Forster's). The legs are pale orange,

the bill mostly blackish.

Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougallii*) Audubon mentioned several small breeding colonies on the Florida Keys. Today one small colony exists off Key West and another colony on the Dry Tortugas. Even these birds are absent some years, adding mystery to the situation. Elsewhere in the state the Roseate Tern is considered an extremely rare transient along the Atlantic coast, and is accidental in winter. All reports along the northern Gulf coast have been questionable. It has been suggested that the scarcity of records is because the species is primarily pelagic in migration, but it must be remembered that the Roseate Tern is a relatively rare species in the U.S., except around the main breeding grounds in Long Island Sound and vicinity. (Where does that population winter?) Most Florida records come during migrations in September, and again from mid-March to mid-May. The maximum ever recorded in one day from the Brevard County shore is only 7. The flight of this species is even lighter and more buoyant than that of other medium-sized terns, but such a characteristic is so affected by wind conditions as to make it unreliable on most days.

Adult: Very similar to Common Tern, but generally more slender with longer, more deeply forked tail. At rest the tail extends far beyond the wing tips (but this is also true in many adult Forster's). The rose wash on the breast is rarely visible. This species has a paler, more silvery mantle; the bill is usually uniformly black (sometimes with a red base); the feet are dusky red. Voice: a harsh rasping "Kraak," lower in pitch than notes of similar terns; also a diagnostic "cheewee" suggesting the note of a Semi-palmated Plover.

Immature and Winter: Generally difficult to identify except at close range. Forepart of head white; eye region, hind part of head and nape black; crown shaded with grayish and indistinctly streaked; lesser wing coverts brownish; bill mostly black; feet dusky orange. The pure white tail generally has no marginal coloration, but this is usually difficult to determine. Most Roseate Terns go south of the U.S. in winter, and most Florida reports at that season are questionable. If it were not for the diagnostic "cheewee" call, this species would generally go unidentified along the coast of Florida.

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