

---

January 2001

## First Record of Elegant Tern in Florida

Ed Kwater

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kwater, Ed (2001) "First Record of Elegant Tern in Florida," *Florida Field Naturalist*. Vol. 29 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn/vol29/iss3/4>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Field Naturalist by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

**FIRST RECORD OF ELEGANT TERN IN FLORIDA**

ED KWATER

3803 Cloverhill Court, Brandon, FL 33511

E-mail: Himantopus@aol.com

On 3 October 1999, Greg Butcher and I led a field trip to Honeymoon Island State Recreational Area, Pinellas County, Florida, as part of the second annual Florida Birding Festival. At 09:15 we located a large flock of terns (*Sterna* spp.) at the "Pet Beach," a long, sandy beach at the southwestern corner of the island. There were at least 4,000 Common Terns (*S. hirundo*), 500 Forster's Terns (*S. forsteri*), and 400 Sandwich Terns (*S. sandvicensis*), but very few Royal Terns (*S. maxima*). During our scrutiny of the tern flocks an Elegant Tern (*S. elegans*) landed directly in front of us. This constitutes the first record of this Pacific Coast species for Florida.

The Elegant Tern was present for 45 minutes, allowing approach to within 40 m. Detailed field notes and photographs were taken. The bird was seen almost daily at the Pet Beach until its final appearance in Pelican Cove at the north end of the island on 22 November 1999 (Pranty 2000). A number of photographs were taken of the bird during its stay and three of these, by Lee Snyder, are reproduced here (Figs. 1-3).

Identification of the Elegant Tern was relatively straightforward, and was based on the following characters. In size the bird was noticeably smaller than a Royal Tern but slightly larger than a Sandwich Tern in direct comparison with both species. The forehead and lores were white and the crown became rather abruptly black with some white flecking and streaking in the fore crown (Fig. 1). One of the most striking features of this bird was the nape that was black with a very long crest of feathers extending down it. These were noticeably longer than the corresponding crest feathers on either a Sandwich or a Royal tern and they produced a very shaggy, unkempt appearance when raised (Fig. 1). When the crest was lowered, the head took on a much more rounded appearance (Figs. 2 and 3). Most of the ear coverts were also black and this coloration extended to well in front of the eye. The bird had a very thin, white eye ring which can just be seen (Fig. 1). The overall combined effect of these characters was to produce a much blacker-headed appearance than was found on any of the Sandwich or Royal terns present. The underparts were white with a faint pink tinge that was most noticeable on the belly. This suffusion can easily be detected in the color print version of Fig. 1.

The upperparts of the bird were a relatively uniform pale gray very similar to those of Sandwich and Royal terns. However the outermost two primaries (p8 and p9, numbered descendantly) were black with white shaft streaks, contrasting markedly with all the remaining primaries and indicating that they were worn, unmolted feathers (Olsen and Larsson 1995). This character was especially noticeable in flight. Figure 2 shows very fresh and newly molted central and inner primaries (p1 to p6). Figure 3 shows p7 as a very short, dark-tipped, actively growing feather. There was also a secondary bar that was slightly darker gray than the rest of the upperwing (Fig. 2). The outermost secondaries were noticeably shorter than the rest, indicating that the bird was also in active secondary molt. The tail appeared to be slightly longer than on a Sandwich Tern with a slightly deeper fork. There were dark subterminal marks on the outer webs of the outermost two pairs of rectrices (t5 and t6).

The bill was distinctive. It was relatively longer and thinner than that of a Royal Tern (almost as long as the head) and drooped slightly along its whole length. The bill was bright orange for most of its length but became yellow on the distal third. There was a very thin black line around the base of the bill, most noticeable at the edge of the feath-



**Figure 1. Second basic plumage Elegant Tern on the Pet Beach at Honeymoon Island State Recreation Area, Pinellas County, Florida. Note the long, slightly drooping bill (which was orange with the distal third yellow), extensive black on the head completely encircling the eye and long, shaggy nape feathers. Photograph by Lee Snyder, 4 October 1999.**

ering on the culmen and ending at the gape. The tarsi and feet were black with the legs appearing proportionately longer than on the nearby Sandwich Terns. These field marks and photographs (Figs. 1-3) clearly indicate that this Elegant Tern was in basic 2 (second winter) plumage (Olsen and Larsson 1995). The characters that support this conclusion include the retained outer two juvenal primaries on each wing, the faint secondary bar and the subterminal black marks in the outer two pairs of rectrices. Olsen and Larsson (1995) state that during the second prebasic molt the last juvenal primaries are replaced from September to December, a molt pattern noted in the Florida individual.

The possibility of this bird being an Old World species, the Lesser Crested Tern (*S. bengalensis*), was considered, but dismissed due to the bird's relatively large size (the Lesser Crested Tern is very similar to Sandwich Tern in size), extremely long nape feathers and slightly drooping two-tone bill (Olsen and Larsson, 1995).

The Elegant Tern has a very restricted world range with only five known nesting colonies along the coasts of southern California and Baja California (Burness et al. 1999). The largest of these colonies, on Isla Rasa in the Gulf of California, contains 22,500 breeding pairs, over 90% of the world population (Clapp et al. 1993). Elegant Terns have



**Figure 2. Note the two retained juvenal outer primaries, active secondary molt, and extensive black on the head completely encircling the eye. Photograph by Lee Snyder, 4 October 1999.**

a rather peculiar post-breeding dispersal pattern in that they move north along the California coast in large numbers between June and September after the end of the nesting season (Roberson 1985, Small 1994). By November numbers begin to decrease at these northern latitudes (Small 1994) and most of the population winters along the Pacific Coast between Nayarit, Mexico and Chile (Devillers and Terschuren 1977, Howell and Webb 1995). The Florida bird may therefore have been a displaced migrant during this southward journey.

There is a relatively limited pattern of vagrancy established for this species. It has been recorded twice in Texas, at Corpus Christi on 25 July 1889 (A.O.U. 1983), and at Lake Balmorhea on 23 December 1985 (Williams 1985). In Arizona there are three records: from Painted Rock Dam on 30 May 1988 (Stejskal and Witzeman 1988), and two different individuals in the Tucson area in May and July, 1990 (Stejskal and Rosenberg 1990). There is also a record from Johnston Atoll in the Pacific Ocean on 19 April 1969 (Amerson and Shelton 1976). The only previously accepted record from the east coast of the USA is from Chincoteague, Virginia on 20 June 1985 (Wilds 1985, Veit 1985). There have also been several records of Elegant Terns from Europe. In 1974 one was found in a Sandwich Tern colony in Gironde, France, and in 1984 two birds were seen at this location, both of them paired with Sandwich Terns (Alstrom and Colston 1991). In 1982 an Elegant Tern was seen at Carlingford Lough, County Down, in Northern Ireland and a second individual simultaneously at Ballymacoda, County Cork in Eire (O'Sullivan and Smiddy, 1988). In midsummer 1988 an Elegant Tern was recorded at Zeebrugge, Belgium (Boesman 1992).

This report provides the first documented evidence of the occurrence of Elegant Tern in Florida. The record has been accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee. Amazingly another Elegant Tern was reported from Fort De Soto County



**Figure 3. Note retained juvenal outer primaries and the black subterminal marks on the outer webs of the outer two pairs of rectrices. Photograph by Lee Snyder, 4 October 1999.**

Park in Pinellas County, Florida, on 2 December 2000. It was rediscovered on 22 December and was present until at least 29 December 2000 (Pranty 2001).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.—I thank Lee Snyder for the use of his excellent photographs in the preparation of this article. I also thank Bill Pranty for useful comments on the first draft.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- ALSTROM, P., AND P. COLSTON. 1991. A field guide to rare birds of Britain and Europe. Harper Collins, London.
- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Checklist of North American Birds. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- AMERSON, A. B. JR., AND P. C. SHELTON. 1976. The natural history of Johnston Atoll, central Pacific Ocean. Atoll Research Bulletin 192.
- BOESMAN, P. 1992. Sierlijke Stern te Zeebrugge in Juni-Juli 1988. Dutch Birding 14:161-169.
- BURNES, G. P., K. LEFEVRE AND C. T. COLLINS. 1999. Elegant Tern (*Sterna elegans*). In The Birds of North America, No. 404 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). The Birds of North America Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- CLAPP, R. B., P. A. BUCKLEY AND F. G. BUCKLEY. 1993. Conservation of North Pacific terns. Pp. 154-162, in The Status, Ecology and Conservation of Marine Birds of the North Pacific (K. Vermeer, K. T. Briggs, K. H. Morgan and D. Siegel-Causey, Eds.). Canadian Wildlife Service Special Publication, Ottawa, Canada.

- DEVILLERS, P., AND J. A. TERSCHUREN. 1977. Some distributional records of migrant North American Charadriiformes in coastal South America. *Le Gerfaut* 67:107-125.
- HOWELL, S. N. G., AND S. WEBB. 1995. A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. Oxford University Press. New York.
- LEFEVRE, K., AND G. P. BURNES. 2000. A closer look: Elegant Tern. *Birding* 32:146-153
- O'SULLIVAN, O., AND P. SMIDY. 1988. Thirty-fifth Irish bird report. *Irish Birds* 3:609-648.
- OLSEN, K. M., AND H. LARSSON. 1995. Terns of Europe and North America. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- PRANTY, B. 2000. Field observations. Fall report: August-November 1999. *Florida Field Naturalist* 28:78-90.
- PRANTY, B. 2001. Field observations. Winter report: December 2000-February 2001. *Florida Field Naturalist* 29:100-112.
- ROBERSON, D. 1985. Monterey birds. Monterey Peninsula Audubon Society, Carmel, CA.
- SMALL, A. 1994. California birds: their status and distribution. Ibis Publishing Company, Vista, CA.
- STEJSKAL, D., AND G. H. ROSENBERG. 1990. The nesting season: Southwest Region, Arizona. *American Birds* 44:1164-1167.
- STEJSKAL, D., AND J. WITZEMAN. 1988. The spring season: Southwest Region, Arizona. *American Birds* 42:469-472.
- VEIT, R.R. 1985. The changing seasons. *American Birds* 39:879-884.
- WILDS, C. 1985. Elegant Tern at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. *Raven* 56:38-39.
- WILLIAMS, F. 1985. The winter season: Southern Great Plains Region. *American Birds* 40:297-299.