

THE WHITE-WINGED BLACK TERN A NEW RECORD FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By JOHN ECKERT

On January 25, 1964, L. Potts, R. Cleggett and I accompanied V. Martin on a trip in his boat to the islands east of Hindmarsh Island. Somewhere east of Ewe Island two small terns with dark bill and feet and all white under surface passed close to the boat. During the following week Potts and Cleggett visited Mosquito Point, near Langhorne Creek, and found a number of similar terns present there. As a result of this Cleggett and I visited the Point again on February 2 and spent some time watching a large body of terns resting on a sandspit. The majority were Marsh Terns (*Chlidonias hybrida*) in breeding plumage, others being in various stages of eclipse. There were also a number of the "mystery" terns.

Having little knowledge of distinguishing the small terns and only Cayley's "What Bird is That?" and Leach's "An Australian Bird Book" as references we were unable to decide if these birds were of a different species.

Their size seemed slightly smaller, the forehead was white, a black cap extended down the neck a little and also down in a narrow strip behind each eye. Some of the birds had a dark leading edge to the wing and some showed brownish streaks on the upper surface. As these streaks are often a sign of immaturity and neither of us had ever seen an immature Marsh Tern we were left in doubt.

On March 1 at a Naturalists Club outing to the Boggy Lake, Marsh Terns were abundant and many of the "mystery" terns were once again present. We asked all members to take special notice of these terns, but the variation exhibited throughout the constantly changing flock proved bewildering. On this occasion a tern with the underparts speckled with black flew past, but this held no significance for us. These terns were present for some weeks more, but we were unable to devote further study to them.

A description of the terns seen on February 2 had been sent to Mr. H. T. Condon, Curator of Birds at the S.A. Museum, who replied that the brownish streaks suggested immaturity, although he was unable to identify the species from the information given. However, in conversation later he intimated that there was the possibility of the birds being White-winged Black Terns (*Chlidonias leucoptera*), an opinion with which I readily agreed after consulting Serventy and Whittell's "Birds of Western Australia" which referred to the speckled underparts sometimes exhibited by this species.

Later an article by Wall (*Emu*, 62, 1962, p. 265) was found which gave a basis for identification, but not yet being fully convinced I wrote to W. R. Wheeler asking for information on the identification of the White-winged Black Tern. He passed the query on to F. T. H. Smith, who had submitted a paper on the species to *The Australian Bird Watcher*. Smith replied with a most comprehensive description of the bird, together with sketches of the head markings and giving differences between it and the Marsh Tern. This left little doubt as to the identity of the birds we had seen.

On December 27, 1964, Cleggett and I visited Boggy Lake and disturbed a group of terns from a sandbar. As they returned the majority were seen to be Marsh Terns in breeding plumage together with a number of obviously immature Marsh Terns with mottled backs like young Silver Gulls. After a few minutes a small tern alighted which fitted Smith's description so well that we both felt sure it must be *leucoptera*. Eventually about twelve had come in to rest, enabling us to check all the identification points we knew. A specimen was later secured and taken to the S.A. Museum where Mr. Condon confirmed the identification.

The paper by Smith in *The Australian Bird Watcher* will undoubtedly be so complete that little would be gained by duplicating much of it here. However, one point may be worth making. Most writers mention the paler tail and rump as a help in distinguishing *leucoptera* from *hybrida*. In our flock which contained immature *hybrida* we found that in checking this feature our eye was always drawn to these immatures, for they had noticeably paler rumps than either of the other types present. Thus a pale rumped

bird in flight need not necessarily be *leucoptera*.

In his letter, Smith made the interesting comment that he had possibly mistaken the species in former years for the Marsh Tern. I feel that observers here may have done the same.

DESCRIPTION OF SPECIMEN:—

The following details of the specimen have been supplied by Mr. H. T. Condon, Curator of Birds, South Australian Museum: "S.A.M. No. B 26642; sex, male; plumage fresh (? adult winter); dimensions: bill 2.3 cms; wing 20.0; tarsus 1.9; middle toe and claw 2.4; tail (outermost feather) 7.2; bill and feet blackish.

Description of plumage—forehead, lores and forepart of crown white; rest of crown and nape very dark grey, some feathers with white tips. A blackish line in front of the eye. Hind neck, face, underparts (including axillaries and under tail coverts) pure white. Ear coverts blackish. Upper mantle dark grey, feathers with white tips. Back, rump and tail pale grey; outer tail feathers whitish, as inner webs of rest of tail. Primaries with outer webs medium grey and inner webs partly white; secondaries grey. A prominent white line along front edge of wing. Primary, greater and median wing coverts pale grey like the back: lesser coverts dark grey.

Locality: Mulgundawa, River Murray, South Australia. Date collected: December 27, 1964.

EDITOR'S ADDENDUM:—

The following additional field notes have since been received from Mr. Eckert.

In late March, 1965, there were a great number of Marsh Terns in eclipse plumage; many of these were similar to the eclipse of *leucoptera* and a very careful study would probably have been needed to place them correctly. However, in mid-summer the task is much easier because the comparatively small number of birds in eclipse can be given more attention and it seems very much easier to pick *leucoptera*. On March 21 there were 3 White-winged Black Terns in advanced breeding plumage in a flock of 2,000 or so March Terns coming in to roost at a swamp.

The paper by F. T. H. Smith, referred to above, has now been published—*Australian Bird Watcher*, 2, 1965, pp. 128-134.