

THE COMMON TERN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By JOHN ECKERT

On January 26, 1967 a flock of about 50 Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) were resting on the sand near the Murray Mouth. With them were 12 to 20 smaller terns with black bills and black caps, but with the forehead white. I assumed that they must be immature Fairy Terns (*Sterna nereis*), but took two as specimens. When measuring these birds later, it became obvious from their length of 13 inches that they could not be Fairy Terns. The long forked tails ruled out the possibility of either the Marsh Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) or White-winged Black Tern (*C. leucopterus*). Although my knowledge of the rarer terns was almost nil, I had made a copy of diagrams of primary feathers shown by Hitchcock (1965a). From these I was able to deduce that the birds were either the Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) or the Arctic Tern (*S. paradisea*) but my copying of the diagrams had not been accurate enough for me to be certain.

On January 28, in company with R. Cleggett, I again went to the Murray mouth. Twelve of the terns were present, again sitting with Crested Terns. They were studied for a considerable time, but although they occasionally shifted position, none was observed to fly away to feed, nor were they joined by any more of the same species. The wing-tips of the sitting birds extended beyond the tail by about half an inch and the dark crown came forward of the eye by about a similar distance. The area around the eye was dark as was the shoulder area. One bird seemed to differ slightly from the others in having grey instead of blackish primaries. However, when collected it proved to be of the same species as the other two specimens, the lighter colour of the primaries apparently being due to recent moult.

Another visit was made to the locality on February 1. The water level which had been high on my first visit had now dropped considerably and bird-life in the area was greatly reduced. Only one of the terns was present but it seemed to differ slightly from those seen previously in that the black of the head came a little further down behind the eye. This bird was taken and made into a

study skin, the other three being taken to the S.A. Museum intact.

Later in February, John Endersby found some of these terns present in the same area but a further visit by myself on March 27 was unsuccessful. However a bird of similar appearance was in the same vicinity on October 22 and a week later at least two were present at a freshwater swamp on 'Poltalloch Plains,' 9 miles south of Wellington. These were among a flock of some 5,000 Marsh Terns and 20 Crested Terns. They were distinguishable from the Marsh Terns by their slightly larger size and long, deeply forked tails. They showed a willingness to perch on posts in the water, a habit shared by the Crested but not the Marsh Terns. A specimen was secured and it proved to be similar to those previously taken. These specimens had been identified as Common Terns by the Curator of Birds at the S.A. Museum, Mr. H. T. Condon, on the basis of the broadness of the dark band on the first primary feather.

After reading W. B. Hitchcock's paper 'Geography and Seasonal Movements of the Common Tern in Australia' (1965b), I had become curious to know to which race these birds belonged. Accordingly the skin of the bird taken on February 1 was sent to Hitchcock for examination. With his reply he enclosed a copy of a paper by Stegmann (1936) on the Palaearctic races of the Common Tern. Stegmann accepted five races of the species, the extremes being the nominate race *hirundo* of Europe with its dark-tipped red bill and *longipennis*, a black-billed form from north-eastern Asia, these being separated by a somewhat intermediate race, *minussensis*. The race *tibetana* inhabits the high country in and around Tibet while the slightly smaller *turkestanica* comes from the vicinity of Turkestan.

Hitchcock has since examined all the above specimens except that collected October 22, and an additional two collected from a flock of 30 at Boggy Lake, the most northerly arm of Lake Alexandrina, a female on February 24, 1968, and a male on March 13, 1968. A few birds were still present until

April 7, but none obviously in breeding plumage.

Hitchcock informs me (in litt. 1-5-68) that he is unable to say with certainty to what subspecies these birds belong, but is fairly sure they are not referable to *longipennis* because in some specimens the bill is not entirely black. The latest reviser of *Sterna hirundo*, Vaurie (1965), states (p. 493) "Geographical variation is clinal in the Palaearctic region. The wing length increases and the coloration of the plumage becomes darker from west to east and also on the high plateaux of central Asia (*S.h. tibetana*), the clinal variation affecting also during the breeding season the colour of the bill and that of the legs and feet. At this season, the bill is red, tipped with black, and the legs and feet are red in the western race (nominate *hirundo*) and in the one of central Asia (*tibetana*), but the bill becomes darker, more invaded with black in western Siberia, the preponderance of dark billed birds increasing eastwards, until the bill becomes wholly black in virtually all the birds (*longipennis*) of eastern Siberia. . ." Vaurie further states (p. 494). "This clinal variation makes it impossible to define with certainty the reciprocal limits of the breeding ranges, and most migrants or winter visitors to southern Asia cannot be identified to subspecies."

Vaurie does not recognise the race *turketanica*, so that the subspecific identity of the first South Australian specimen, which was provisionally referred to that race by Hitchcock (*loc. cit.*), must also remain in doubt.

At the time of Hitchcock's paper in the *Emu* (1965b), only two records of the Common Tern had been reported for South Australia. The first was a bird taken by A. H. Lendon and R. W. McKechnie at Buckland Park on December 31, 1956 (Lendon, 1957). This bird had been seen in the locality for some weeks before it was secured. The second was a part skeleton found on Kangaroo Island by members of the 1959 R.A.O.U. Campout (Wheeler, 1960). It could not be subspecifically identified.

Since then the only occurrences of the Common Tern in this State other than those stated above are one taken at Port Gawler (Museum party October 29, 1962), and those of Attiwill (1966) in the Naracoorte and Lucindale areas—sightings during

February and March, 1964 and March-April, 1965, by J. B. Hood, H. Bakker and himself, with a specimen being taken on April 3, 1965, and forwarded to the S.A. Museum. I have examined this specimen, together with the Buckland Park bird and those taken by myself, and although its coloration is similar to that of the Common Tern, I consider the bird to be an immature Marsh Tern, because of its smaller size, shorter bill, short comparatively square-cut tail and the pattern of the primary feathers, which is identical to that of the Marsh Tern but not the Common. The dark blotches on the back of this bird are, in my opinion, a sign of immaturity, and the bird matches quite well two other immature Marsh Terns in the Museum collection, one from Newcastle Waters (2-5-1962) and another from Mulgundawa (4-1-1965). From its bill length and coloration Attiwill's specimen would probably be the most mature of these three. From examination of Museum specimens it would appear that the bill length of the immature Marsh Tern is shorter than that of adults.

If my opinion of the Naracoorte bird's identity is correct, then the only positive evidence of the Common Tern away from the sea in this State would be the two birds seen south of Wellington and the flock frequenting the Boggy Lake during autumn 1968. These birds would have been about 30 miles from the nearest part of the coast.

SUMMARY

The Common Tern has been recorded from three separate areas in South Australia: Buckland Park (specimens October, December), Kangaroo Island (skeleton, September) and Lake Alexandrina (specimens October, January, February and March and observed until April 7 one year, 1968). The subspecific identity of South Australian birds is still debatable but they are probably not referable to *longipennis*; this question can only be settled by the collection of specimens in breeding plumage.

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AN ADDITIONAL RECORD OF THE COMMON TERN

On July 27, 1960, a dead tern was found on the beach at North Glenelg. It was forwarded to the S.A. Museum where it was identified by the Curator of Birds, Mr. H. T. Condon as a Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*). This is the identity of the specimen (North Glenelg, July, 1960), referred to in Condon's *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, 2nd. Edn., 1968, p. 54.

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