

Audubon Coastal Bird Survey: Terns in Winter



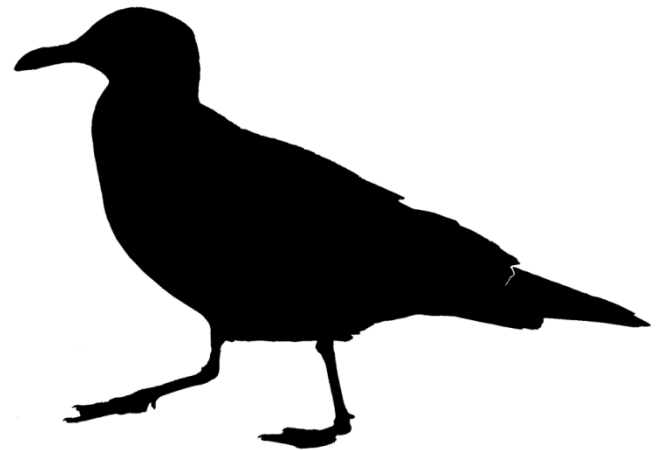
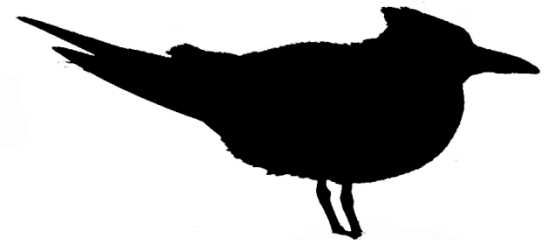
Terns (versus Gulls)

- Buoyant fliers
- Pointed wings
- Slender wings and body
- Forked tail
- Less “hunched”



Terns (versus Gulls)

- Rarely swim/float
- Pointed, tapered bills
- Flat crowns or crested
- Short legs
- Long-winged
- More slender



Tutorial in Tern Molt

- Like warblers, orioles, and grosbeaks, terns have distinct non-breeding and breeding plumages.
- The non-breeding plumage is similar between adults and immatures, acquired in Jul-Sep
- The breeding plumage is acquired in Feb-Apr
- Both fall and spring molts involve body and flight feathers
- For the “white” terns (excluding Black Tern), the summer and winter plumages are similar except that in winter the black cap is reduced or absent.
- In some first-year birds, the non-breeding plumage is expressed year-round

Tutorial in Tern Molt



Non-breeding



Breeding

Breaking Down the Terns - Size

- Large: Caspian, Royal, Sandwich*
- Medium: Forster's, Common, Gull-billed
- Small: Least, Black

- Works for mixed groups and in comparison with known species (various Gulls, other terns, sandpipers). All terns are smaller than Herring Gull
- **Caution:** avoid using size alone

* Sandwich Tern is really intermediate between Large and Medium terns

Breaking Down the Terns - Genera

- *Thalasseus*: the “crested terns”
 - Royal, Sandwich
- *Hydroprogne*: the “water martin”
 - Caspian
- *Sterna*: the “classic terns”
 - Forster’s, Common
- *Sternula*: the “little terns”
 - Least
- *Gelochelidon*: the “laughing swallow”
 - Gull-billed

Breaking Down the Terns - Season

Gone in winter

- Least Tern
- Black Tern
- Common Tern
- Sandwich Tern

Who is left?

- Caspian Tern
- Royal Tern
- Forster's Tern
- Gull-billed Tern

Other terns not discussed today

- Black Skimmer (coastal, distinct)
- Sooty Tern vs. Bridled Tern (strictly pelagic, ID can be challenging)

Breaking Down the Terns – Bill Color

Red/Orange Bills

- Caspian
- Royal

Black Bills

- Forster's
- Gull-billed
- (Common, Sandwich, Least, and Black)

Large Winter Terns: Caspian vs Royal

~ Laughing Gull sized

Royal Tern

- Slimmer bill
- Often orange bill
- No black in forecrown
- crested



Caspian Tern

- Heavier bill
- Often red/red-orange bill
- Mottled black in forecrown
- Minimally crested

Large Winter Terns: Caspian vs Royal



Caspian Tern

- Heavier body
- Shorter tail
- Darker wing tips
- Often looking down

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Royal Tern

- Slimmer body
- Longer tail
- Paler wing tips
- Often looking forward



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Medium Winter Terns

Gull-billed Tern

- Heavier body, broader wings, heavier bill, shorter tail
- Rarely in mixed loafing flocks
- Often forages over land, sometimes shallow pools/marshes, rarely ocean



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Forster's Tern

- Slimmer body, narrower wings, thinner bill, longer tail
- Often in mixed loafing flocks
- Often forages over water in marshes or ocean, never land



99% of medium terns on ACBS routes are Forster's

Rare Winter Terns

Common Tern

- Structurally similar to Forster's
- Black nape, black "carpal" bar, and grayer-bodied
- Often in mixed loafing flocks
- Almost always beaches and ocean (not marshes)



Forster's Tern

- Slimmer body, narrower wings, thinner bill, longer tail
- Often in mixed loafing flocks
- Often forages over water in marshes or ocean, never land



99% of medium terns on ACBS routes are Forster's

Rare Winter Terns

Sandwich Tern

- Similar to Forster's, but larger, longer-billed, black "crest", and flight like Royal
- Can be with mixed loafing flocks
- Almost always beaches and ocean (not marshes)

Forster's Tern

- Slimmer body, narrower wings, thinner bill, longer tail
- Often in mixed loafing flocks
- Often forages over water in marshes or ocean, never land



Richard Gibbons



99% of medium terns on ACBS routes are Forster's

Rare Winter Terns: The Little Guys

Least Tern

- Similar to Common Tern, but smaller, more bat-like flight



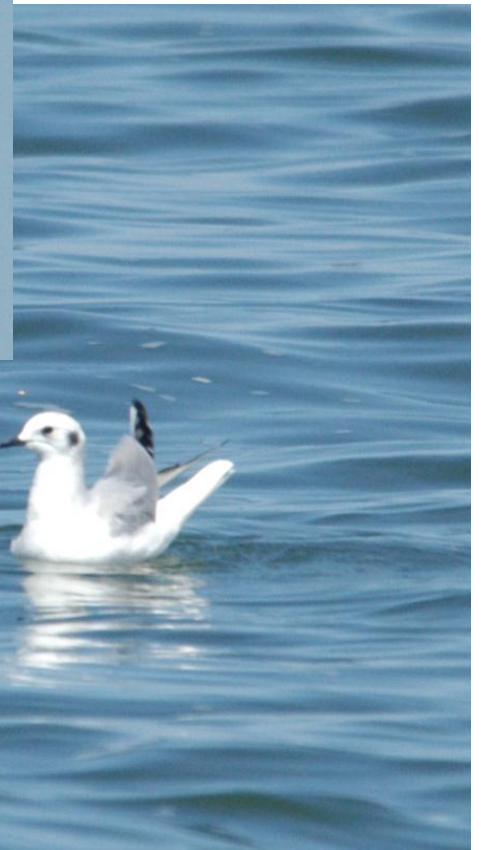
Black Tern

- Distinct



These are especially rare and require good documentation to be accepted as valid records

Look-a-like: Bonaparte's Gull

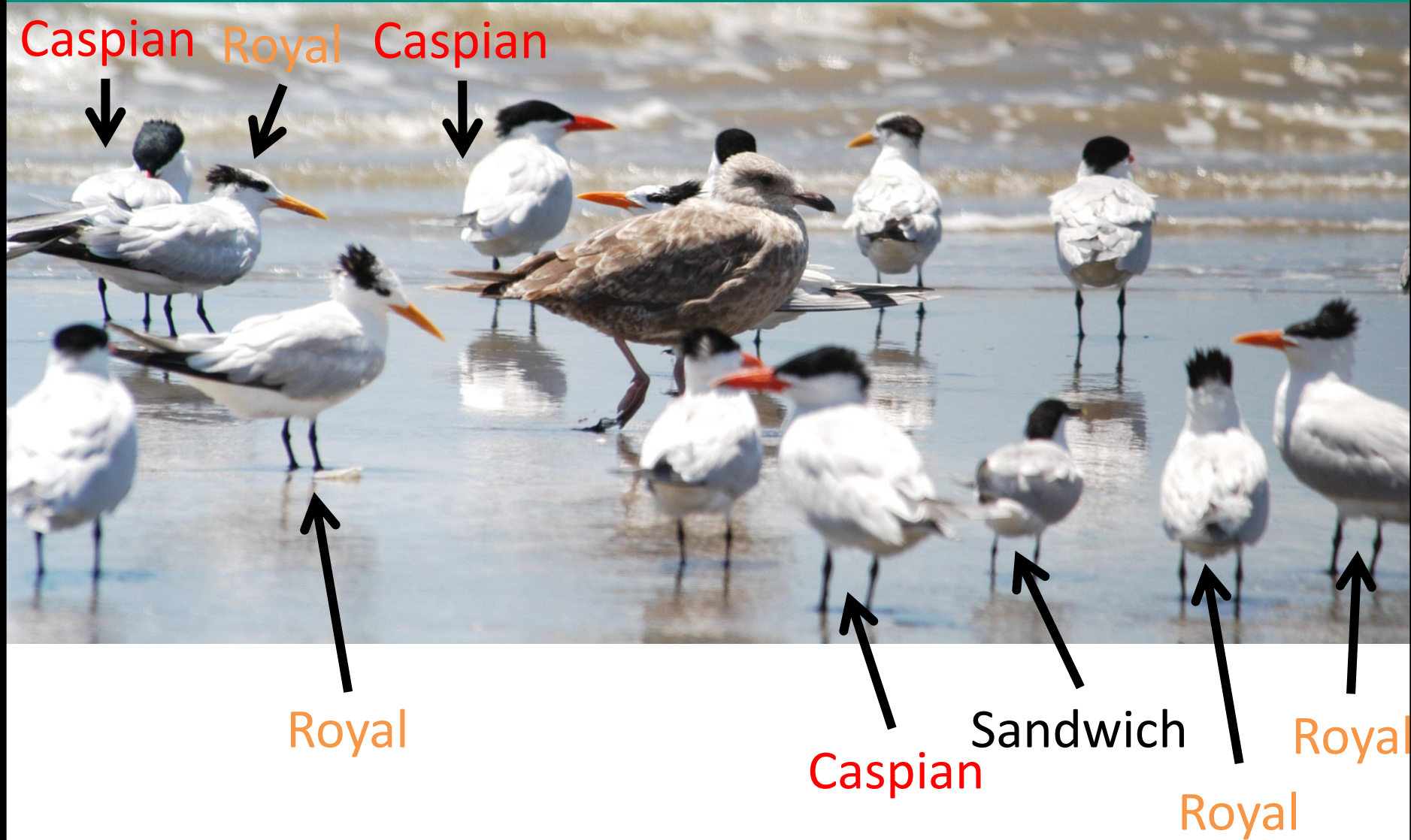


(Laughing Gull for size comparison)

Sorting Through Mixed Loafing Flocks



Sorting Through Mixed Loafing Flocks



Winter Tern Quiz: ANSWERS







May





Winter Tern Quiz: ANSWERS



Forster's Tern. Note deeply forked tail.



Royal Tern



May

Royal Terns

2 Caspian Tern



Gull-billed Tern. Note short tail, weak eye mark, curved ridge to bill (more dagger-like)



Caspian Tern. Note dark wing tips, short tail, husky body, blackish tip to bill.