

Nikon PHOTO QUIZ

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This photo quiz features a bird with long, pointed wings, a sharply-pointed, bright red bill, a black crown from bill to nape, a grayish breast and belly, a silvery-gray dorsal surface to the wings, and a long tail.

It is probably fair to say that most birders would instantly recognize this bird as one of the ten species of terns that have occurred in Ontario.

With few exceptions, terns in Ontario are seen in two different age classes: adults or juveniles. It is rare to find sub-adult terns in southern Ontario, since most remain on their wintering grounds until they return north for the first time as breeding adults. Adults are seen most frequently in breeding plumage in spring and summer, but many attain non-breeding plumage prior to their fall migration away from Ontario (Black Tern and Forster's Tern being good examples).

Based on this bird's entirely dark crown from the base of the bill to the nape, its complete complement of uniformly fresh looking and fully grown primaries, its long, unworn tail feathers, and the lack of any hint of a dark carpal bar on the upper surface of the wing, we are able to reliably age this tern as an adult in breeding plumage.

Both the Black Tern and the accidental White-winged Tern are easily eliminated from consideration. Unlike this quiz bird, both of these species are very short-tailed and have a uniformly black head and breast in breeding plumage.

The accidental Sooty Tern is also quickly eliminated from further consideration, since it is a much darker tern across the surface of the wings in all plumages than this bird.

The accidental Least and Sandwich Terns are both easily eliminated by our quiz bird's entirely red bill. The adult Least Tern in breeding plumage is unique among North American terns in having a bright yellow bill. The adult Sandwich Tern has a very long, narrow, black bill with a pale ivory tip.

Both of the large, crested terns — the Caspian Tern and the accidental Royal Tern — have much larger, thicker, dagger-like bills than our quiz bird. They also have shorter, less deeply-forked tails and lack gray underparts.

Our quiz bird is, therefore, one of the three medium-sized species of terns that regularly breed in Ontario: Common Tern, Arctic Tern or Forster's Tern.

A variety of characters allow us to eliminate Forster's Tern from further consideration. Forster's Tern has an orange-based bill with a black tip, quite unlike the all-red bill of our quiz bird. Additionally, the bill of a Forster's Tern is thicker along the entire length than the very thin bill we see on this bird. Forster's Tern also has all-white underparts that contrast markedly with the upperparts. This bird has a very gray breast and belly that appear concolour to the dorsal surface of the wing. The outer primaries of Forster's Tern in breeding plumage tend to be whiter than seen on this bird.

Our quiz bird is, therefore, either a Common Tern or the similar Arctic Tern. Quite an assortment of characteristics should allow reliable separation of these two species.

One striking difference between Common and Arctic Terns is the length of the legs. Arctic Terns have much shorter legs than Common Terns, but in this instance that distinction is not going to be too helpful, since the legs are entirely covered by grasses. Certainly the bird appears to be short-legged though, with the belly nearly on the ground, giving a very Arctic Tern-like presentation. However, we will need more solid criteria to be confident.

Arctic Terns have finer bills than Common Terns, and this bird appears

to have a very fine bill that is more consistent with an Arctic Tern. Arctic Terns generally show an entirely coral-red bill in breeding plumage, whereas Common Terns have a prominent black tip to their more orange-red bill. The all-red bill of our quiz bird is better for an Arctic Tern. However, bill colour should be used cautiously, as a supporting feature. Some Arctic Terns develop black tips to their bills and (as Ron Pittaway has previously noted in OFO News) some Common Terns in summer can show all-red bills, lacking the black tip.

The primary patterns of these two species are also important in separating them. As we have a view of both the dorsal surface of one wing and the ventral surface of the other, this will be of



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great value to us. Common Terns show a distinct dark wedge on the dorsal surface of the central primaries that becomes increasingly prominent throughout spring and summer through wear. Arctic Terns show uniform gray upperparts, and lack this dark wedge altogether. In this respect, our quiz bird is more like an Arctic Tern as well. On the underside of the outermost primaries, Common Terns have wide dark tips, whereas Arctic Terns show much finer dark tips. Again, our quiz bird is more consistent with Arctic Tern for this feature.

Common Terns generally show darker secondaries in contrast to the underwing lining, whereas Arctic Terns

have very whitish secondaries which do not tend to contrast with the underwing coverts. Our quiz bird clearly shows the latter pattern.

Common Terns generally have shorter tails than Arctic Terns. At rest the tails of Common Terns usually do not project beyond the wingtip, whereas the tails of Arctic Terns routinely do project beyond the wingtips. This feature becomes less useful late in the season as the long outer tail feathers become quite abraded (or sometimes missing altogether). Even though our quiz bird has both wings up, we can see that it has a very long tail (giving it a decidedly Long-tailed Jaeger-type jizz), that will almost certainly extend beyond the folded wings at rest.

Arctic Terns tend to have smaller, rounder heads than Common Terns, which tend to have flatter crowns. The very small, rounded crown of our quiz bird also supports Arctic Tern.

Arctic Terns also tend to have more extensive black caps than Common Terns, extending further through the lores, leaving a much narrower area of white between the gape and the edge of the black cap. We see this Arctic Tern-like feature very well on this bird.

The gray underparts of Arctic Terns are more extensive than on Common Terns. Most of the side of the head of an average Common Tern is white, with the gray underparts extending up to the upper breast only. In Arctic Terns this gray colouration extends further up



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onto the neck and head, leaving a narrow, highly contrasting area of white limited to the cheek area just below the dark crown. Our quiz bird clearly shows this latter pattern.

In general, the gray underparts are a bit paler than the upperparts in the Common Tern, whereas the two are more concolour in the Arctic Tern. Our bird appears to show the latter pattern, again supportive of an identification of Arctic Tern.

All the field marks we have examined have been more consistent with an identification of Arctic Tern rather than Common Tern.

This adult **Arctic Tern** was photographed by Mark Peck on 5 July 2007 at Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island, Nunavut.

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