

The bird featured in June as the At a Glance mystery species should not cause the thoughtful viewer any serious identification problem. The presence of a dark cap, not a complete hood, should be sufficient to identify the bird as a tern and not one of the small, hooded gulls. Thus, the initial choice is between whether the bird is one of the smaller tern species (e.g., Common, Roseate, etc.) or one of the medium-to-large species (e.g., Gull-billed, Royal, Caspian, etc.). Because there is nothing available for size comparison, we must look at the bird's structure for clues. Most obvious is the exceptional length of the bird's legs. The legs of the smaller tern species have much shorter tarsi (portion of leg below the joint) relative to the upper portion of the leg. Likewise, the bill on the pictured bird is heavy and thick, with none of the stiletto effect of the smaller tern species. And finally, the tail can be seen to barely reach the midpoint of the folded wings - a character quite unlike that shown by any of the smaller sternids in this plumage.

Thus, we are led to believe that the tern in the photograph is not one of the Massachusetts breeding species (Roseate, Common, Arctic, Least) but rather is one of the more unusual larger species. Sandwich Tern may be eliminated by the heaviness of the bill, thickness of the neck, and lack of an obvious, shaggy crest on the back of the head. The full cap, with no white visible on the forehead, indicates that the bird is in breeding plumage. If this were not the case, the separation between Gull-billed, Royal, and Caspian terns would be much easier in a black and white photograph. Because bill color is not usable as a field mark in the photo, alternative characters must be relied upon. Gull-billed Tern can be rejected on the basis of the long bill, angular head shape, and the faint suggestion of a crest on the head. Hence, the bird is either a Royal or a Caspian Tern. Elegant Tern of the Pacific Coast would also be possible but can be eliminated on the basis of the very heavy bill. The obvious black coloration on the underside of the bird's left wing, the short tail, angular head, thick neck, and very heavy bill argue in favor of Caspian Tern. Additionally, the lack of an obviously crested head, coupled with the fact that the bird has a complete black cap, points to Caspian Tern as well. Except for a brief period prior to breeding, Royal Terns seldom exhibit such extensively dark caps, and most Royal Terns seen in Massachusetts have a prominently white forehead. Indeed, the bird pictured is a Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*) in breeding plumage, photographed in May 1984 at Scituate, Massachusetts.

Wayne R. Petersen

CORRIGENDUM to "Peddocks Island Bird Life, June to October, 1984," by Polly S. Stevens (BOEM 13: 137, June 1985): see page 138, fourth paragraph. Because Ring-billed Gulls were observed on Peddocks Island during the nesting season, the author included them in the category of neighborhood breeding birds. Although this species has in recent years extended its breeding range, the nearest nesting Ring-billed Gulls would be found in northern New England, not (yet) in Massachusetts.

At a Glance . . .



Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

Can you identify this bird? Identification will be discussed in next issue's *At a Glance*. Bird Observer will award a PRIZE to the reader who submits the most correct answers in 1985. Please send your entry on postcard to Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178 before the answer is published.



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