

Seldom do birders have occasion to view a bird exclusively head on as in April's photograph. Indeed, until it is noted that the bird's feet are pointing toward the camera, it may not be immediately obvious that this is even a frontal view. Thus, the visible characteristics must be carefully analyzed and integrated before a correct identification can be made.

The most striking features are, first, what appears to be a white face against an otherwise dark head and body; second, short legs with webbed feet, best noted on the bird's right foot; and third, a slim, slightly decurved, and markedly pale bill. This anomalous combination of characteristics seems at first to bear little resemblance to species illustrated in popular field guides.

Immediate emphasis should be placed on the webbed feet. This feature at once eliminates landbirds. Although loons, tube-noses, cormorants, waterfowl, gulls, and alcids have webbed feet, these can be rejected on the basis of either coloration or bill shape, leaving only jaegers and terns as viable possibilities. Despite their notorious plumage variability, even extremely melanistic jaegers would fail to display an irregular white face patch. Jaegers also possess longer legs.

Only terns remain as web-footed birds with species uniformly dark below. Of this group, the Black Tern, the immature Sooty Tern, and the two tropical noddy terns are solidly dark on the breast. The immature Sooty Tern is uniformly dark. The Brown Noddy and the rare Black Noddy can be eliminated because the white on their heads forms a crown patch rather than an irregular white face patch. Thus, noting the irregular and mottled face patch is tantamount to identifying the bird as a Black Tern (*Chilidonias niger*). The individual in the picture has begun its autumn molt into winter plumage, a process that in many species is initiated on the head, and still retains the solid black underparts of breeding plumage. The light color on the bill can be discounted as an artifact created by glare. Because Black Terns nest in freshwater marshes, it is not uncommon for them to perch occasionally on logs and branches near the water.



Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

The White-winged Tern, an accidental vagrant that has only once been recorded in Massachusetts, cannot be ruled out from the photo. The Black Tern in the picture was photographed in July near its nest in central Maine.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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