

Pointed wings and a long pointed tail, a black cap, and a slender pointed bill all indicate that December's mystery bird is a tern. Four medium-sized tern species regularly occur in Massachusetts: Roseate, Common, Arctic, and Forster's. As adults, all four species have complete black caps in breeding plumage. The slightly smaller and similarly patterned Least Tern has a white forehead in corresponding plumage.

Identifying terns in breeding plumage involves looking closely at the primary pattern, wing to tail ratio, bill coloration and shape, leg length, and overall shape. Because the pictured bird's wings are raised, the reader can see both the upper and underwing primary patterns, which provide sufficient information to identify this bird.

A careful examination of the underwing shows a neatly defined series of dark tips to the outer primary feathers, giving the impression of a narrow dark border along the trailing edge of the outermost portion of the wing. The top view of the opposing wing gives a similar impression, and neither wing surface has a wedge of dusky coloration protruding into the white or the gray. Thus, all of the black coloration is well defined and limited to the trailing edge of the wing. In the Common Tern, the black is much more extensive and less well defined beneath the wing, while on top, a conspicuous blackish wedge typically runs into the primaries. The much whiter and frostier Roseate and Forster's terns show very little dusky on either wing surface and look much paler overall than the bird in the picture.

In addition to its characteristic primary pattern, the mystery tern is noticeably gray below with a whitish line just below the black cap, and it appears to have a uniformly colored bill. In high breeding plumage, the very white-looking Roseate Tern may possess a uniformly black bill, just as the grayer Arctic Tern usually displays a uniformly red bill. In shape, however, the Roseate Tern's bill is longer and slightly thinner than that of the Arctic Tern. Likewise, Roseate Terns have significantly longer tarsi than Arctic Terns, so that a standing bird would normally display a "leggier" look than the pictured bird. Both Common and Forster's terns have bicolored bills, and their bills are normally thicker than those of an Arctic Tern.



Arctic Tern Photo By Wayne R. Petersen
Plymouth Beach, May 1991

A final feature worth highlighting in the photograph is the rounded, rather than flattened, appearance of the bird's head. This distinctive head shape, when combined with the bird's short legs, gray underparts, white facial stripe, uniformly colored bill, and distinctive primary pattern, all indicate that the bird is an Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*).

AT A GLANCE



Photo by David Rowell

Can you identify this bird?

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

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