

Alas, a bird of summer! A tern — the mere name of which conjures up the sound of surf, the smell of salt air, and the sting of greenhead flies. Massachusetts birders are especially well positioned to appreciate and puzzle over terns, not only because 14 species have been recorded in the Commonwealth (plus the Black Skimmer), but because five species nest in the Bay State, two of them in greater abundance than practically anywhere else in North America.

Even a quick glance at October's mystery photograph suggests that it is a tern and not a gull, the only other viable choice for a bird postured the way the mystery bird is standing. If further proof is required, a careful look at the tapered, sharp-pointed bill (not blunt and laterally compressed), the suggestion of sharply pointed wings, the black mask through the eye, and the overall whiteness of the bird's plumage all scream sternid, not larid. Gulls, for the most part, appear big and clumpy, or else they exhibit distinctive plumage or bill features that should readily eliminate them from confusion.



Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

Suspecting that the bird is a tern, it is important to focus on what the somewhat fuzzy photo reproduction lets us see. Perhaps most noticeable is a black mask through the eye. A black eyepatch is typically a hallmark field character for a Forster's Tern in non-breeding plumage. Unfortunately, the mystery tern also seems to exhibit a noticeably dark "shoulder" area on the folded wing — not a feature of Forster's Tern! A closer look shows that the bill appears to be especially short and fine and rather uniform in color (i.e., not strongly bicolored). Also, the crown is not heavily streaked, nor is there an obvious black scarf on the back of the head and nape. What can be seen of the legs suggests that they are light, not dark. And finally, there seems to be no evidence of extended central tail feathers beyond the folded wing tips.

Evaluating these various attributes one by one, it is possible to gradually reduce the possibilities. The very whiteness of the bird at once eliminates Brown Noddy and Sooty and Bridled tern; the light legs, particularly in conjunction with the overall diminutive proportions of the bird, safely remove Bridled, Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, and Gull-billed terns as identification candidates, since all of these have black legs. Similarly, the Black Tern, even in winter plumage, would be notably darker above and would possess a distinctly different head pattern and an obviously blacker bill than the pictured tern.

This elimination process reduces the possibilities to Common, Roseate, Arctic, and Least terns. In adult breeding (alternate) plumage, these species all possess a more or less complete black cap. In adult winter (basic) plumage, these same species feature a well-defined black nape, or scarf, on the back of the head, which contrasts strongly with a more or less unstreaked white forehead and crown. So where does this leave us? Since the tern in question has a whitish nape, it cannot be an adult in either breeding or winter plumage. Additionally, in first-summer plumage, these species look quite similar to winter adults, except that they have black bills and none of them display a strong dark eye patch like the mystery tern. However, Common Terns (and Roseate Terns to a lesser extent) do exhibit the strong black "shoulder" patch shown by the mystery bird when they are in winter plumage or subadult plumage, but never the black eye patch.

Indeed, there is only one tern occurring in Massachusetts that shows the diminutive proportions of the pictured bird in conjunction with a dark shoulder patch, a prominent eye patch, a relatively white nape, and a lightly streaked crown: a Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) in juvenal plumage.

Least Terns are fairly common as breeding birds on wide sandy beaches at a number of sites along the Massachusetts coast. The juvenile in the picture was photographed at Third Cliff Beach in Scituate.

AT A GLANCE

Photograph by Wayne Petersen



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