

F O C U S

# The Small Terns



Rich Stallcup

**S**MALL TERNS ARE REALLY PERFECT birds. They are lovely, sleek, and buoyant. Though they have webbed feet, all their life functions except nesting and resting are accomplished in flight. While Forster's Terns are mostly resident, Commons and Arctics are *highly* migratory. A nestling Common Tern banded at Long Island, New York, in June 1969 was caught by the crew of a fishing boat west of Ivory Coast, West Africa, in December of the same year. Some Arctic Terns have proven able to travel over 22,000 miles annually between the Arctic and Antarctic. By following the sun in this manner, they spend most of their lives in the light of day.

*Common Tern* is, well, common as a migrant along the coast and is often found in good numbers where small terns congregate. Its migration takes place mostly nearshore, but occasionally Commons are found with the more expected Arctics in the offshore

Winter plumage heads: Arctic (top), Common (center), and Forster's (bottom).



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**FORSTER'S**

- 1) Adult mantle very pale gray, dorsal tail surface similar, producing little contrast on upper parts (not valid in immature).
- 2) Adult with distinctly white outer web to outer tail feathers (tail grayish).
- 3) Adult primaries lighter than mantle above and light with smudgy gray tips below.
- 4) Basic plumage (winter and immature) with black eye patch extending back to include auriculars (ear coverts) only. Very rarely, dark flecking continues to connect narrowly on nape, like a party mask.
- 5) Immature with light leading edge to inner wing.
- 6) Immature with buff edges to back feathers and black tips to outer three rectrices.
- 7) Wingbeats flying at ease relatively shallow and fast.

**"COMMIC"**

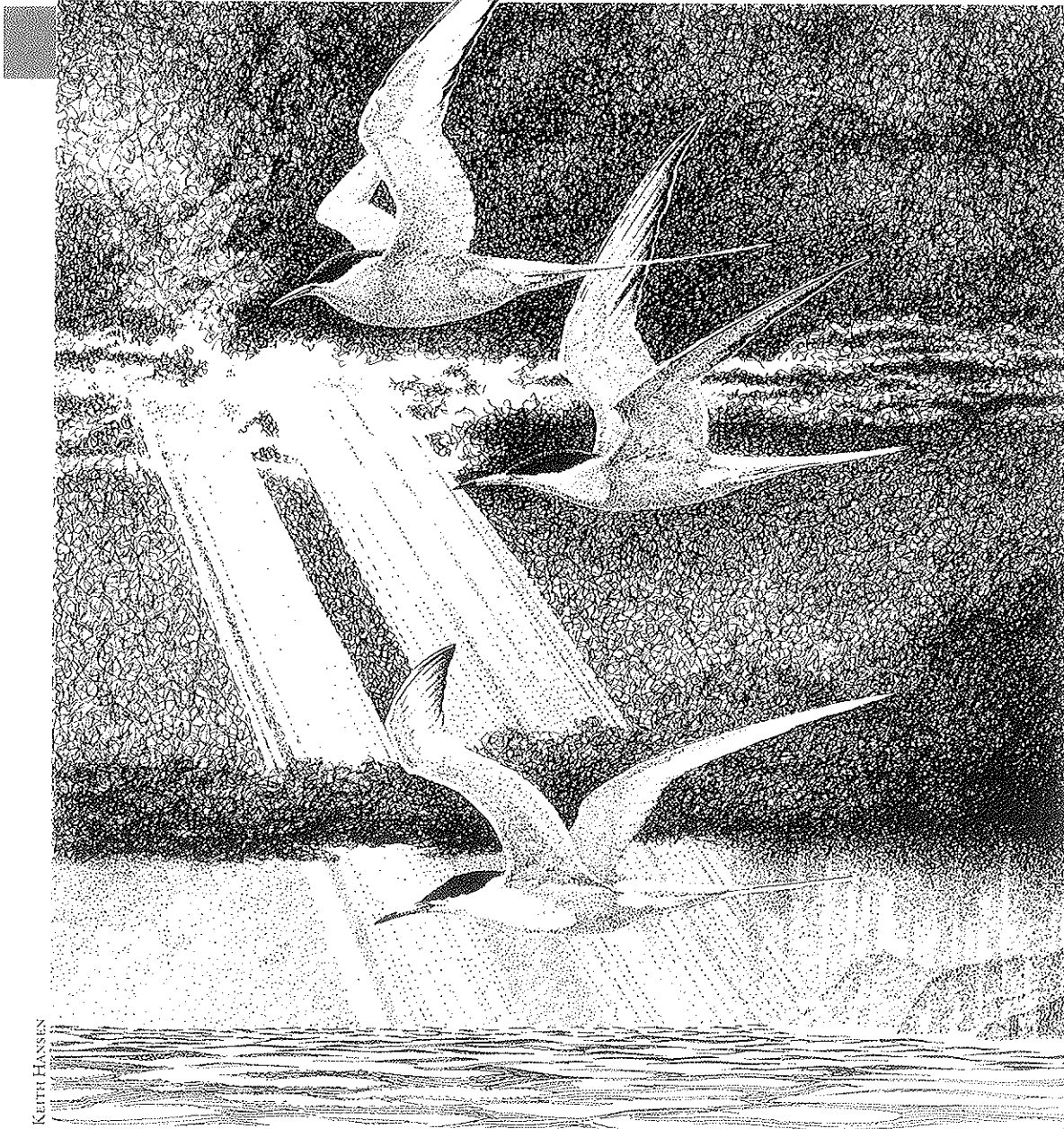
- Adult mantle darker gray than Forster's; white rump and dorsal tail yield distinct back/tail contrast (as in *immature* Forster's).
- Adult with distinctly black outer web to outer tail feather (tail white).
- Adult primaries as dark or darker than mantle above and white, tipped with black, below.
- Basic plumage (winter and immature) with eye in black, black continuing to hindcrown tri-angling on to nape, like black bandana.
- Immature with dark leading edge to inner wing most obvious as a dark bar along the "shoulder" on perched birds. This mark can sometimes be obscured by unruly breast feathers.
- Immatures with brown and black edges to back feathers & dusky tips to outer rectrices.
- Wingbeats flying at ease relatively deep and slow.

**COMMON**

- 1) In flight, relatively long bill and head and shorter tail make that part of the bird in front of the leading edge of the wings about the same length as that part behind the trailing edge. Applies to a good, straight profile view only.
- 2) Long bill gives the head a long, sleek, drawn out look.
- 3) Looking up at the bird, little or no light can be seen through the flight feathers, and the tail shows dark outer edges.
- 4) Underside of primaries broadly and blurrily tipped with black.
- 5) Adult in spring slightly flushed with light gray (hard to see). No obvious white stripe on face.
- 6) Adult bill usually orange-red or red and most often tipped with dark.
- 7) When perched, legs (tarsi) quite long when compared to similarly perched Arctic Tern. Forster's is tall, like Common.
- 8) When perched, wing tips meet the end of the tail.
- 9) Dorsal wing coverts of immature are gray.
- 10) Dark wedge on upper wing surface extends from tip toward base of fifth and sixth primaries.

**ARCTIC**

- In flight, relatively short bill and head and long tail make that part of the bird in front of the leading edge of the wings little more than half as long as that part of the bird behind the trailing edge.
- Short bill and rounded head produce a delicate, cute look.
- Looking up at the bird, much light may be seen through many inner primary feathers, forming large triangles of transparency, and the tail appears white all over.
- Underside of primaries narrowly and sharply tipped with black.
- Adults in spring are distinctly gray below but show a clearly defined white facial stripe between the black cap and the gray throat.
- Adult bill blood red with no dark tip (Common may approach this).
- When perched, legs (tarsi) quite short when compared to similarly perched Common Tern.
- When perched, wingtips fall short of the end of the tail.
- Dorsal wing coverts of immature are whitish.
- Lacks the black wedge on upper wing surface.



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corridors. Late July through late October and mid-April through May are the periods of passage.

Uncommon but regular mid-August to mid-October, *Arctic Tern* travels well offshore and is rarely seen on or from the beach. It is also a rare nearshore migrant in spring, and all of the very few onshore records are from late April to early June. Many thousands of Arctic Terns pass California, fall and spring, but they travel non-stop beyond the continental shelf.

### Field Identification

THE CERTAIN IDENTIFICATION of immatures, and many times of adults, is difficult and sometimes impossible under anything but perfect viewing conditions. So try to find the field marks listed here on terns flying or standing close to you on a calm day with soft light. The characteristics given in these two tables represent a summary of published descriptions, most notably that

*Small terns in flight: Arctic (top), Common (center), and Forster's (bottom).*

from "Pelagic Birds of Monterey Bay" (*California Birds* 1:29-36, 1970). They should help enunciate differences between identically aged individuals of the three species.

Since Forster's Tern is the most different in the set, begin with the characteristics that distinguish it from the "Commie" (Common plus Arctic) types. Then move on to the list of characteristics contrasting Common with Arctic.

Common and Arctic Terns are superficially quite similar, but posture, shape, and color pattern differences make them easily separable under good viewing conditions. After overall shape, the dark and light pattern of the primaries (as a whole) is the best mark.

Note: There are two characteristics, sometimes considered singularly diagnostic, that should be used only to qualify other compiled features for identification. First, *bill*

*color* is quite variable, especially on terns away from their breeding areas. In spring, Forster's usually has a yellow-orange bill with a dark tip, Common usually has an orange-red bill with a dark tip, and the Arctic's bill is usually blood red including the tip. Forster's, however, can be quite red in the bill, and Common can be red with no black tip. Bills of all three species turn black in the winter. Second, the apparent *tarsal length* depends upon how the bird is standing and how the belly feathers are arranged. This "tallness" feature is only of real use when Arctic Terns are standing *with* Forster's or Commons.

So go out to the coast during migration, to a place where these birds congregate, and pick out the various species. As well as being educational and a challenge to your senses, it can be a real birding term-on.

\* This and other past Focus columns are available as PRBO reprints for \$.75 apiece.