

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* in the Straits of Gibraltar

On the occasion of investigations dealing with movements of seabirds and Cetaceans through the Straits of Gibraltar, from 18th September to 13th November 1987 I made records during 188 car-ferry transects between Ceuta (Spanish North Africa) and Algeciras (Spain).

At 15.43 GMT on 27th October, during a crossing of the Straits from Algeciras to Ceuta, at about 36° 00'N 5°22'W (in the middle of the Strait, about 9.5 km off either coast), I noticed a tern approaching the ship from the east. From the distance, its general appearance and jizz gave the impression of an adult Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*. When the tern was closer to the ship, I recognized that its bulk did not reach the size of this species, though the general characters of the bird still recalled a Sandwich Tern. Before passing the bow of the ferry and flying west, the tern accompanied the ship for a minute in a distance of only about 10–15 m and was seen under optimal light conditions. The following description summarizes the notes I recorded on pocket dictaphone:

About the size of Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*. **Head** white except a clear-cut black face-mask as the most striking feature of the bird, forming prominent eye-patches extending to the lores, including the ear-coverts; nape white, apparently without any spot. **Upperparts** pale grey merging without contrast into white rump. **Upperwing** pale grey; outer primaries with dark grey edges, contrary to the white inner primaries. **Underwing** whitish except a grey edge of outermost primaries. **Tail** appeared all-white; extension of forkation not visible. **Bill** appeared totally black, rather long but proportionally shorter than the bill of *S. sandvicensis*. The coloration of **legs** was not recorded. No **calls** were heard.

As I had extensive field experience with non-breeding Forster's Terns from North America and with most Sternidae species known from the Western Palaearctic (I have seen 17 of the 21 species), I was immediately sure that this bird was an adult Forster's Tern in nonbreeding plumage.

A confusion with a Sandwich Tern (the most abundant *Sterna* species in the Straits) can be excluded by the size and daintiness of the bird and by its head pattern. Although I have seen Sandwich Terns in nonbreeding plumage with a head pattern similar to the eye patches of Forster's Tern, the ear coverts are never clear-cut demarcated to the nape, which always shows at least some black spotting. The conditions of the observation should also have enabled to see the whitish tip of the Sandwich Tern's bill.

In non-breeding plumage, the equally sized Common Tern *S. hirundo*, Arctic Tern *S. paradisaea* and Roseate Tern *S. dougallii* are easily distinguishable by markedly other head patterns and are generally less similar to Forster's Tern than the Sandwich Tern.

First-winter Forster's Terns show dark tail tips, a more extensive and less demarcated black face pattern and blackish wing tips.

Although the record is neither documented by a photograph nor confirmed by another observer, the identification is reliable. With comparative experience, Forster's Tern is unmistakable in non-breeding plumage; hence HARRISON (1985), discussing the similarity to other species, only mentions that „in eastern Atlantic it could be overlooked as Sandwich Tern.“

The Forster's Tern is a Nearctic species with a widespread breeding distribution throughout temperate North America, where it is mainly found in fresh and salt mar-

shes (ROBBINS et. al 1966; HARRISON 1985). In winter its habits are more maritime, when the birds can be found from California and Virginia in the North to Panama and to the West Indies in the South (HARRISON 1985).

Perhaps, the bird was a victim of the westerly autumn gales of 1987, which caused bad inundations in southern Spain and especially severe winds in the Straits on 27th October.

Other Nearctic Laridae, which have been recorded in the wider Straits region, are the recovery of a banded Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* at Barbate, Cadiz, on 20th January 1965 (DENNIS 1981), a Laughing Gull *L. atricilla* on 7th May 1981 near Malaga (BARRETT 1983) and a Franklin's Gull *L. pipixcan* on 29th October 1983 at Torremolinos (DE JUANA & PATERSON 1986).

In the Western Palaearctic the first Forster's Tern, probably an adult specimen, was taken on 22nd October 1959 in Iceland (CRAMP 1985). Since 1980, when the next was seen in Britain, there is a considerable increase in observations which probably is caused mainly by the growing awareness of observers, but perhaps also by a northward spread of Forster's Tern on the American Atlantic coast (CRAMP 1985). Until 1986, 12 birds are known from Britain and another 5 from Ireland (ROGERS et. al 1983–87). The only Forster's Tern for continental Europe was an adult observed on 2nd and 3rd November 1986 in the Netherlands (OVAA 1987). So the record under discussion, which seasonally agrees well with the appearance of other Forster's Terns in Europe, is so far the southernmost in the Western Palaearctic and the first for the Mediterranean and North African region.

Zusammenfassung

Sumpfseschwalbe *Sterna forsteri* in der Meerenge von Gibraltar

Am 28. Oktober 1987 befand sich eine adulte Sumpfseschwalbe im Ruhekleid in der Meerenge von Gibraltar. Nach Feststellungen in Island, auf den Britischen Inseln und in den Niederlanden handelt es sich um den bisher südlichsten Nachweis der nordamerikanischen Art in der Westpalaäktis.

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