

Occurrence of the Eastern Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo longipennis*) in Australia

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A few years ago I had occasion to plot the distribution of the White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*) in Australia. One record, of a bird from Cape York, northern Queensland, seemed so unusual in relation to other authentic occurrences that confirmation of the identification seemed desirable.

The specimen in question was formerly in the 'Mathews' collection at Tring and is the type of *Sterna striata yorki* Mathews.¹ It was collected at Cape York on January 1, 1913, by H. S. Vidgen and is now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York (specimen no. 746510, ♀). In reply to my enquiry, Ernst Mayr of that institution stated: "The species is wrong . . . as you had anticipated, since the type of *Sterna striata yorki* is a perfectly normal specimen of *Sterna hirundo longipennis*." Dr. Murphy confirmed my identification (*in litt.*, October 17, 1941).

A second example of the Eastern Common Tern from within the limits of Australian seas was taken in Torres Strait almost seventy years ago. During the Chevert expedition to the north-east coast of Australia and New Guinea, in 1875, George Masters collected a Tern on Warrior Reef* on July 17, 1875. Masters labelled this bird '*Sterna melanorhyncha*,'² the name at that time applied to the White-fronted Tern occurring in Australia but which we now know to be conspecific with the New Zealand species *striata*.

In 1912,³ Gregory M. Mathews placed Masters' '*Sterna melanorhyncha*,' which he had not then seen, in the synonymy of the Roseate Tern (*S. dougallii*). Later he was able to examine the specimen, which is in the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, and he then determined it as an example of the White-fronted Tern (*S. striata*) in winter plumage.⁴

Having in mind the wrong identification of the specimen from Cape York, I arranged with Messrs. G. M. Mathews, Tom Iredale and N. W. Cayley to examine the skin in the Macleay Museum. This was done on October 5, 1943, and it was then found that this bird also was an example of the Eastern Common Tern (*S. h. longipennis*).

The Common Tern breeds throughout the Northern Hemisphere and migrates southwards during the northern winter. Peters⁵ lists four subspecies, viz. *hirundo*, *tibetana*,

*Warrior Reef lies about half way between Cape York and Papua. The actual reefs are covered at high tide; even at low tide only portions are uncovered. In all probability the specimen was collected on Warrior, or Tut, or Tutte Island in the same locality (lat. 9° 48' s., long. 142° 58' E.).

longipennis and *minussensis*. The European form, *hirundo*, occurs commonly in South African waters, though the Siberian race, *longipennis*, the one that concerns us, does not normally migrate further south than the Moluccas, the Aru Islands, New Guinea, Louisiade Archipelago, Bismarck Archipelago and the Solomon Islands. Roy Bell collected three specimens on Lord Howe Island during very stormy weather on February 2, 1915⁶ (specimens nos. 746327-9 ♂ ♂ ♂, American Museum Natural History). This occurrence constitutes a considerable extension in the range of the species in the south-west Pacific. Lord Howe Island lies 300 miles east of Port Macquarie on the New South Wales coast, though, zoologically, it is not within the Australian region.

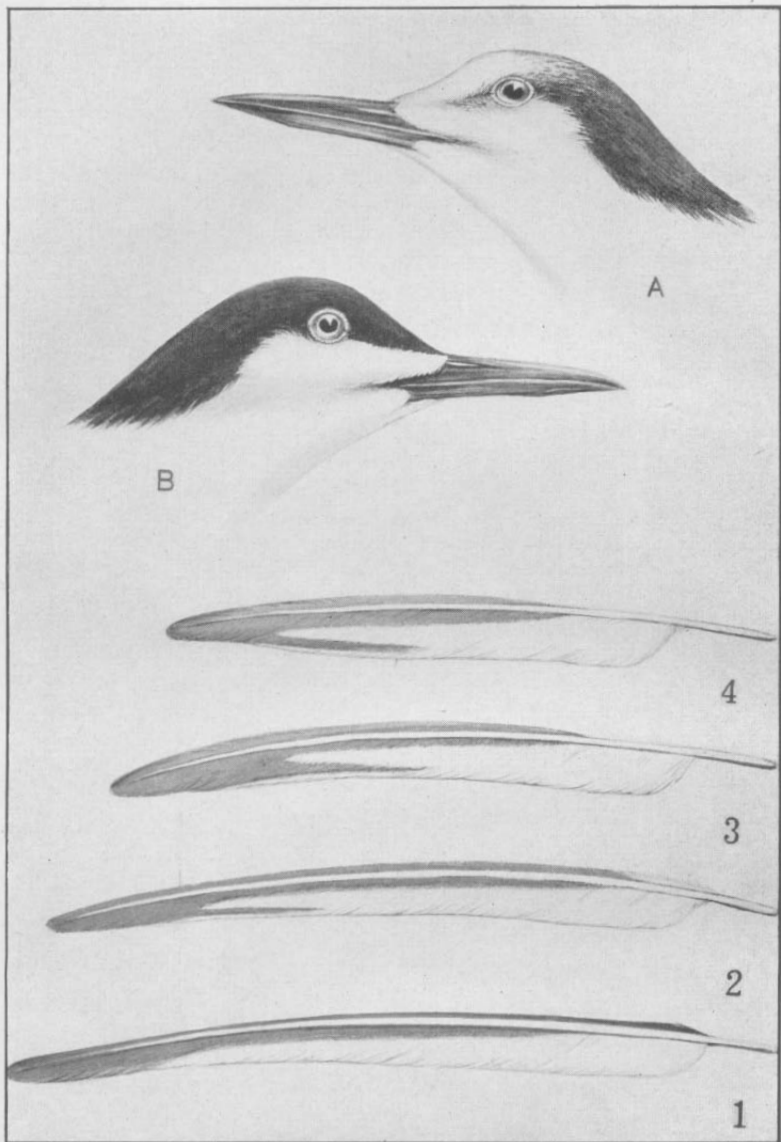
The occurrences of the Eastern Common Tern on Warrior Reef, at Cape York, and on Lord Howe Island may be considered, in the present state of our knowledge, abnormal.

The White-fronted Tern, with which the Eastern Common Tern has been confused, has a southern distribution: New Zealand (breeding), Tasmania (?breeding), South Australia, and eastern Australia, probably as far north as mid-coastal Queensland.

The immature and winter (or 'eclipse') plumage phases of the Eastern Common Tern closely resemble the same phases in the White-fronted Tern. Both have entirely black bills in all stages of life, but that of *longipennis* is more robust than *striata*, being 10 mm. in depth at its base as against 8 mm. for *striata*. The main distinguishing character is to be found in the pattern of the primaries. In *longipennis* all the primaries, except the first, have a distinct white wedge on their inner webs, whereas in *striata* there is a blackish band only along the inner edge of the inner web of each primary. Adults in breeding plumage are quite distinct; *longipennis* has the entire forehead, crown and nape black, whilst *striata* has the forehead white, with the crown and nape black.

It may be of some significance that the majority of the specimens of the Eastern Common Tern collected in the southern parts of its range are in immature plumage. Perhaps young birds, only to be distinguished in the final stages of immature plumage from adults in eclipse plumage by the brownish 'shoulders,' are inclined to wander more than adults. The *Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum*⁷ lists six specimens from the Malay Peninsula, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, all as 'immature.'

Until recently the Eastern Common Tern has been considered a distinct species. It is listed as the Long-tailed Tern (*S. longipennis*) by W. B. Alexander.⁸ Not having access to comparative material, I have followed the latest classification of the group, which is that of Peters,⁵ in



Heads and wing primaries of *Sterna hirundo longipennis*:
A and B—two-thirds natural size; 1, 2, 3, 4—two-fifths natural size.

Drawings by N. W. Cayley.

treating it as a geographical race of the Common Tern (*S. hirundo*).

The synonymy, covering the Australian records, reads:
Sterna hirundo longipennis Nordmann

Sterna melanorhyncha (not Gould) Masters, *P.L.S. (N.S.W.)*, vol. I, 1877 (pt. 2, February, 1876), p. 62. Warrior Reef.

Sterna striata yorki Mathews, *Aust. Avian Record*, vol. II, no. 5, September 24, 1914, p. 86. Cape York.

Particulars of the specimens from Warrior Reef, Cape York and Lord Howe Island are:

1. ♀ 'Warrior Reef,' Torres Strait, coll. July 17, 1875, George Masters. Macleay Museum, University of Sydney.

Wing 269 mm., culmen 35 mm., tarsus 21 mm. Immature.

1. ♀ Cape York, north Queensland, coll. January 1, 1913, H. S. Vidgen. No. 746510, American Museum Natural History.

Wing 260 mm., culmen 35 mm., tarsus 18 mm. (Mathews¹).

3. ♂ ♂ ♂ Lord Howe Island, coll. February 2, 1915, Roy Bell. Nos. 746327-9, American Museum Natural History.

N.B.: "... all three specimens from Lord Howe Island are just completing their moult. Two of them seem to be in immature plumage, as indicated by the dark 'shoulders.' Specimen no. 746329, however, is definitely adult in my opinion." (E. Mayr, *in litt.*, Nov. 16, 1943.)

The head and first four primaries of the specimen in the Macleay Museum, collected at Warrior Reef in 1875, are figured in the accompanying plate (figs. A, and 1, 2, 3, 4.) Fig. B represents the head of an adult bird in breeding plumage. My sincere thanks to Neville W. Cayley, who kindly prepared the plate, also to the several gentlemen mentioned in the text for information supplied.

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