

An Occurrence of the White-fronted Tern in Tasmanian Waters

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In spite of the fact that the White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*) is always listed as a Tasmanian species, definite records of its appearance in Tasmanian waters are surprisingly few. Indeed, from time to time doubts have been raised as to whether this species occurs south of Bass Straits at all. The only record since 1920 that I have been able to find is one by J. A. Tubb, who saw a White-fronted Tern off Simpson's Point, South Bruny Island, in August, 1945. The record is quoted by K. A. Hindwood in *The Emu*, vol. 45, pt. 3, p. 179, in an article in which he exhaustively examined the status of the species in Australian waters. For the period prior to 1920 published information about the White-fronted Tern on Tasmanian coasts appears to be almost entirely the work, or to be based on the work, of ornithologists of last century, and, as Mr. Hindwood has shown, some of this data is not acceptable now. In view of these facts the following observations may be of some interest.

In May 1948 I was fortunate enough to locate a party of White-fronted Terns in Tasmanian waters. I came upon six birds in company with twenty-two Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) on a sandspit at Orford on the east coast of Tasmania. The first record was on May 9, and I saw the White-fronted Terns in small numbers on various occasions from that date until May 22, when my vacation ended. Though I had not seen the White-fronted Tern before, I was familiar with its field characters from published descriptions, and from clear photographs published by K. A. Hindwood in *The Emu* (*loc. cit.*), and *Wild Life* for July, 1942, p. 264. Consequently I had no difficulty with identification.

The White-fronted Terns at Orford were always in company with Crested Terns, and on some occasions there were Silver Gulls (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) present too, a useful mixture of species that helped greatly with determining size and plumage colours. Most of the observations were made about the middle of the day when the Terns and Gulls were usually resting on the end of a sandspit near the mouth of the Prosser River. By means of a very cautious 'stalk,' I was always able to approach to within twenty yards or so of the resting birds and study them through x8 binoculars.

The following notes were made in the course of the observations. Plumage states are discussed in detail below. Size: About three-quarters that of the Crested Tern, or possibly a little less. Bill: Long and black. Head: Forehead,

white, the white extending well back towards the crown. Sides of head, crown, and nape blackish. Legs: Dark red-brown. At times the legs appeared to be as dark as those of the Crested Tern, and I had to await favourable conditions of light to determine the true colour.

Plumage states varied between the two extremes mentioned below, but the general colour of the back and wings was a light grey approaching much nearer to the light grey of the mature Silver Gull than to the grey of the Crested Tern. On May 11, I saw a White-fronted Tern with the wings and back showing a smooth even light grey with no trace of darkening anywhere. The black of the crown and nape appeared to be unrelieved; and I took this bird to be an adult in eclipse plumage. It was the only bird I saw in that plumage state. A week later, on May 18, I saw the other extreme in a bird that showed considerable mottling on the wings, comparable to the mottling on a young Silver Gull. The plumage of this bird agreed well enough with that of the bird on the left in plate 20 of Mr. Hindwood's article in *The Emu*. As this bird was certainly not among the six I saw on May 9, there were at least seven White-fronted Terns in the area. The remaining birds had varying degrees of dark around the shoulder of the wing, and dark markings or patches along the folded wing, parallel to the long axis of the body, for perhaps two or three inches. In the main these birds approximated to the third bird from the left in plate 20, though I should have taken the black of the head to be a little more entire; and to the White-fronted Terns illustrated in *Wild Life*. I assumed birds in this plumage to be juvenile birds from early broods in the 1947-48 season, and the mottled bird to be from a late brood.

On May 11, after disturbing three White-fronted Terns from the sandspit, I watched them in flight over the bay just outside the line of surf. They seemed more intent on play and pursuit than on the serious business of getting food, and in the grace of their flight and the rapidity of their turning they far outdid the Crested Terns that were fishing near them.

Since the White-fronted Tern is an autumn migrant to our shores from New Zealand, the east coast is almost certainly the most likely place for them to occur in Tasmania. So far as I am aware, most of the east coast is not regularly worked by bird observers. This may account for the fact that the White-fronted Tern is not recorded more frequently from there.

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