

SHORT NOTE

First record of whiskered tern (*Chlidonias hybridus*) for the South Island, New Zealand

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The whiskered tern (*Chlidonias hybridus*) is found in much of Europe, Africa, central and southern Asia, and Australia. It is a rare vagrant to New Zealand with 5 records up to 1987 (Turbott 1990), all in the North I: Lake Horowhenua in 1977 and 1978, Lower Waikato River in 1978, Pukekohe in 1980 and Lake Rotorua in 1987. This paper reports 2 recent records of whiskered tern in Canterbury, including the 1st record of the species for the South I.

At 08:00 h on 15 Dec 2005, while conducting a waterfowl census at the Bromley Oxidation Ponds in eastern Christchurch, I noticed a very dark tern hawking insects over a pond adjacent to the Avon-Heathcote Estuary (Fig. 1). The bird appeared similar to a black-fronted tern (*C. albostratus*) but was darker and did not have a white rump. I watched the bird for almost an hour using 10 x 42 binoculars and 25 x 60 spotting scope. It was readily recognisable as a whiskered tern in breeding plumage and a species I have seen many times in Australia and South-East Asia.

A general description was as follows. Head: black cap, coming down to just above the eye and touching base of bill; wide, white cheek stripe, more prominent than typical for black-fronted tern. Body: dark grey on breast and belly; lighter grey on sides and back; pale undertail coverts; grey back and

mantle. Tail and rump: both grey and very different to the contrasting white rump and grey tail of black-fronted tern. Bill, legs and feet were red. The bird behaved in typical marsh tern fashion, flying into the wind and taking prey items from the water by surface dipping. When the bird reached the edge of the oxidation pond, it turned and flew rapidly back to its starting point and began a new feeding circuit.

Within a few hours several observers saw the bird. It was located again on 16 and 17 Dec but not seen subsequently and is believed to have left the area. No whiskered terns were reported during the subsequent 16 months until mid May 2007. This record of whiskered tern was accepted by the OSNZ Records Appraisal Committee (UBR 21/2009) and is considered to be the 1st record for the South I.

At 11:00 h on 16 May 2007 I was at Travis Wetland, Christchurch, with John Skilton and Matt Rose, watching brown teal (*Anas chlorotis*), which had been released earlier in the day. We noticed a medium-sized grey tern flying over the central part of the wetland. It seemed too dark to be a black-fronted tern (an uncommon visitor to the site) and we provisionally identified it as a whiskered tern. At about the same time, from the southern side of the wetland, Israel Didham made independent observations of the same bird. He also speculated that it may have been a whiskered tern. We made a 2nd sighting of the bird at 12:30

h, this time closer, thereby enabling us to confirm its dark grey plumage, grey rump, black cap and a reddish bill. It flew high and rapidly on wind gusts, staying within the confines of the 130 ha wetland for a short period, then flying over surrounding suburban environments. We made 2 further sightings at 13:30 and 15:00 h, this time the bird was in the company of a black-fronted tern. The contrast between the grey rump of one bird and the white rump of the other was noted and our earlier provisional identification of whiskered tern confirmed. This sighting was subsequently accepted by the Records Appraisal Committee as a whiskered tern (UBR 2011/5) and it constitutes the 2nd verified record for the South I. Reports from the Blenheim Oxidation Ponds in Jan 2006 and Lake Grassmere in Feb 2006 are unverified (Gill *et al.* 2010).

Gill *et al.* (2010), following Higgins & Davies (1996), recognise 3 subspecies of whiskered tern and assign birds seen in New Zealand to the race *Chlidonias h. javanicus*, which breeds in Australia. This approach is at variance with many overseas authorities, including Wetlands International (2006) and Clements (2008) who recognise 6-7 subspecies and assign *Chlidonias h. fluviatilis* to Australian-breeding birds. They distinguish these from *Chlidonias h. javanicus*, the form which breeds in India and Sri Lanka and winters in southeast Asia and Indonesia. Birds seen in New Zealand are assumed to come from Australia (Gill *et al.* 2010). Whatever the outcome of taxonomic considerations, the Dec breeding plumage of the Bromley bird and paler grey plumage of both that bird and the one at Travis Wetland, relative to photographs of the Indian/Sri Lankan subspecies, supports the likelihood the Canterbury birds were of Australian origin.

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Fig. 1. Whiskered tern over Bromley Oxidation Pond, Christchurch. Note distinct black cap, white cheek and grey rump.

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