

SHORT NOTES

WHISKERED TERN IN BREEDING PLUMAGE

The Pukekohe-Tuakau sewage oxidation ponds are about 22 km from the mouth of the Waikato River and close to the willow belt that borders the river. Here on 8 March 1980, we saw a tern with the characteristic flight of a marsh tern. As we approached, we realised that it was a Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) in breeding plumage, for it had a black belly. The following notes were made during a 3-hour watch, the bird sometimes coming as close as 10 metres.

Bill crimson, fairly long, about as long as the head. Forehead, crown and nape black; on the crown a short faint diffused line of white flecks. The cap encompassed the eye. Below it, a broad and obvious white margin extended from the bill along the cap to the hind neck.

Upper surfaces: Wing, shoulder, and back an even silver-grey. Outer three or four primaries dark grey with white quills; the tips of these outer primaries showed as a dark trailing edge. Pale behind the carpal joint. Rump and tail pale silver-grey.

Underparts: Neck and breast even silver-grey. A smoky-grey margin to leading underwing from body to carpal joint; rest of underwing off-white. From a distance, the belly looked black in contrast with the grey neck and pale underwing; it was in fact uneven dark grey and black when seen closely. This dark colour stopped abruptly behind the wings. Sides of rump, vent, and under tail-coverts white. The end of the tail had a shallow curve with the outer edge looking rounded when half spread. The broken colour on the belly and the faint white line over the crown indicated transitional plumage.

Legs red (darker than those of Red-billed Gulls, *Larus novae-hollandiae*). They were hard to see because the bird tended to perch only briefly and at a distance, but in flight in strong wind, when the legs were held dangling, the legs were obvious and looked surprisingly long.

The bird fed regularly on the longest beat available on the ponds, some 50 metres, with a strong wind on its left quarter, constantly dropping to the right to take food. When feeding, it flew 2-3 metres high over open water, up to 4 metres over ponds with vegetation, and sometimes remained on the wing for over 2 hours.

The bird was seen later by various members, including B. Brown, J. Eller, H. & T. R. Harty, D. A. Lawrie, A. Monaghan and S. M. Reed. We saw it last on 11 March, when it flew south over the willows toward the river.

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