

SHORT NOTE

Year of the tern: the first record of black tern (*Chlidonias niger*) from New Zealand

OSCAR J.W. THOMAS*

ELA K.S. HUNT

Department of Zoology, University of Otago, Dunedin 9016

The black tern (*Chlidonias niger*) is a small marsh tern predominantly found in the Northern Hemisphere. The preferred nesting habitat of the species comprises freshwater and brackish wetlands, but outside of this they also frequent lakes, rivers, wastewater ponds, and estuaries, rarely travelling far inland (Higgins & Davies 1996). There are two distinct subspecies – the Eurasian black tern (*C. n. niger*) breeds sparsely across Europe eastwards to Mongolia in central Asia, wintering in Egypt and along the west African coast. The American black tern (*C. n. surinamensis*) breeds widely across North America, and migrates south to the Central and South American coasts. The species is extremely rare in the Australasian region (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017), with only four previous confirmed records – three from Australia, and one from Papua New Guinea (the sole record of a bird in breeding plumage; Finch 1986).

On 21 January 2022, OJWT was notified through the 'New Zealand Bird Identification' Facebook page that local birder Elizabeth Taylor had posted a photo of an unusual tern at Waikanae Estuary (39.874°S, 175.001°E) in Wellington, the week before. It appeared to be much smaller than the white-fronted terns (*Sterna striata*) it was roosting with, and unlike them it had black earmuff markings on its head, as well as mottled grey upperwings. To our knowledge, all field marks pointed towards white-winged black tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*), so we revised our plans and visited the site to see if it was still present. It was darker than we expected it to be, and EKSH pointed out that it should have redder legs, but they were almost black in colour. Back in Wellington OJWT circulated the photographs among birding-related groups and forums, and it was not long before the more experienced (and optimistic) pointed out that the bird did not resemble a typical white-winged black tern at all.

Received 13 September 2022; accepted 28 March 2023

*Correspondence: thoos290@student.otago.ac.nz

In comparison, the black earmuff markings were matte and more extensive, grey upperparts much darker and more mottled, the bill much longer and legs darker, the rump grey, and most importantly bold grey shoulder tabs were present – diagnostic for black tern. Now accepted by the Records Appraisal Committee, this is the first record of the species for New Zealand. In addition, this bird was further identified as immature due to the bold black carpal bar, and of the Eurasian subspecies owing to the clean white underwings, solid dark cap markings and relatively small shoulder tabs (Fig. 1).

Two weeks later the bird was still present, having relocated to join a white-fronted tern flock on the Plimmerton coast (41.078°S, 174.862°E; c. 26 km south of the original sighting), and joined intermittently by migrating black-fronted terns

(*Chlidonias albostratus*) and common terns (*Sterna hirundo*). Inexplicably, a sooty tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*), normally a tropical species, was simultaneously observed c. 6 km north at Pukerua Bay (41.028°S, 174.889°E). At the same time, a white-winged black tern and a whiskered tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) were reported from Waituna Lagoon in Southland (46.564°S, 168.637°E), completing the rare *Chlidonias* marsh tern sweep for New Zealand. In addition to all the above, this summer also yielded cyclone driven vagrant black noddies (*Anous minutus*), brown noddies (*Anous stolidus*), New Zealand's first living bridled tern (*Onychoprion anaethetus*), and first ever recorded black-naped tern (*Sterna sumatrana*) to the upper North Island (Miskelly *et al.* 2023). Twenty of the 21 species of noddy or tern ever recorded in



Figure 1. Immature Eurasian black tern (*Chlidonias niger niger*) at Waikanae Estuary Spit on 21 January 2022; (a) roost with white-fronted terns (*Sterna striata*) in the background, and (b) in flight showing diagnostic grey shoulder tabs. (Photographs: OJWT).

New Zealand were reported throughout the year, the one missing being crested tern (*Thalasseus bergii*) (Miskelly *et al.* 2023).

The black tern was first discovered at Waikanae Estuary, Kapiti Coast on 14 January 2022 and continued to be reported there until 22 January, before turning up on the Plimmerton coast on 31 January and staying until 10 February. One additional record came from Pukerua Bay on 15 February. Due to the extreme rarity and close proximity, all sightings are assumed to be of the same individual. With the highly dispersive and migratory nature of terns, increased birder presence and experience nationwide, and changing global climatic conditions, 2022 can truly be regarded as the ‘Year of the Tern’ for New Zealand.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Elizabeth Taylor for the initial recognition of the bird as something unusual and worth sharing on social media, Sunita Singh for accompanying us to Waikanae, as well as Russell Cannings, Ian ‘Sav’ Saville, and John Graff for first questioning the identification. Thanks also to Zohara Rafi and editor

Craig Symes for their assistance and comments on drafts of this manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- Finch, B.W. 1986. Black tern *Chlidonias niger* at Moitaka settling ponds, National Capital District – first record for the New Guinea Region. *Muruk* 1: 26–28 (reprinted in 1990 with page numbers 27–29).
- Higgins, P.J.; Davies, S.J.J.F. (Eds) 1996. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic birds. Volume 3: Snipe to Pigeons*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Menkhorst, P.; Rogers, D.; Clarke, R.; Davies, J.; Marsack, P.; Franklin, K. 2017. *The Australian bird guide*. Clayton, Victoria, Australia, CSIRO Publishing.
- Miskelly, C.M.; Crossland, A.C.; Saville, I.; Southey, L.; Tennyson, A.J.D.; Bell, E.A. 2023. Vagrant and extra-limital bird records accepted by the Birds New Zealand Records Appraisal Committee 2021–2022. *Notornis* 70(2): 60-73.

Keywords: Black tern, *Chlidonias niger*, first record, vagrant, Waikanae