THE WHISKERED TERN IN NEW ZEALAND — FIRST RECORDS

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ABSTRACT

The circumstances are given of the first recorded Whiskered Terns *(Chlidonias hybridus)* in New Zealand, at Lake Horowhenua, Levin in 1977 and 1978. Reasons are given why the birds were probably from Australia *(C. h. javanicus)*. The field characters of the non-breeding adult plumage of the Whiskered Tern, Black Tern *(C. niger)*, White-winged Black Tern *(C. leucopterus)* and Black-fronted Tern *(C. albostriatus)* are compared. The nomenclature of Mees (1977) is used, at species level.

THE BIRDS

During 1977, EBJ had been continuing his regular visits to Lake Horowhenua, Levin, in the Manawatu district of the North Island. On 21 August, he mentioned in a letter to BDH that for three weeks at the public domain on the north-west shore of the lake there had been three small terns, two of which he thought were White-winged Black Terns *(Chlidonias leucopterus)*. On 4 September, W. F. Cash and BDH visited the lake and were joined by EBJ. Two terns on fence posts in the water at the northern end of the domain were examined by telescope. Both birds were clearly of the same species, in complete non-breeding plumage but without markings to suggest immaturity. On the basis of their plain grey and white plumage, shallow-forked tails, and bill and legs blackish with crimson tinge, they were provisionally identified as White-winged Black; but did not " look " right for that species. They seemed rather large, rather long in bill and leg, lacking the darker wing- and mantle-markings usually seen on White-winged Black Terns in New Zealand, and had a totally unfamiliar head pattern. From literature consulted in subsequent weeks, they were identified as Whiskered Terns *(C. hybridus)*.

Description

Upper surface, including hind-neck and tail, plain light or silvery grey. Grey so pale as to look almost white, so that it was difficult to decide whether there was any white on neck, rump or tail. Primaries darker grey.

Under surface wholly white.

Tail square or at most very shallowly forked.

Bill fairly long, with noticeable gonys, black with a strong tinge of crimson about the gape.

Legs blackish but with strong crimson tinge at certain angles of light. Long (for a tern), even when body hunched while facing into the wind.

Head white, with black arc round rear of upper nape, tapering forward to eye and slightly on to lores but not reaching bill. Within the arc, on top of crown, an area of black and white mottling with white predominant, not extending forward of the eyes. This head pattern is shown in Smythies (1960, Plate 8), Frith (1969, Plate 14) and Slater (1970, Plate 48).

Further observations

On 17 September, EBJ saw the birds distantly on fence posts one bay further north along the shore. On 1 October, BDH and EBJ visited the lake independently. BDH saw the two perched on the original posts. One bird was apparently unchanged, plain pale grey above, white below; black C from eye to eye round upper nape, broader at rear and perhaps extending further down the nape; extensive mottling on crown; tail square-ended when fanned for balance during wind gusts, with a shallow fork when partly closed. However, the other bird looked dusky on the belly; this was seen by telescope to be a dense scattering of sooty feathers around and forward of the legs. When on one occasion the wings were stretched upwards, a few dusky feathers were seen along the line of the humerus but the underwing was otherwise white. A crimson tinge was particularly noticeable on the blackish legs. Evidently moult into breeding plumage was beginning. EBJ noted that the whole crown, including forehead, was dark grey to black but BDH did not note so extensive a change. EBJ also noted that in flight this bird showed white underwings, except for a narrow grey line along the front edge and small grey tips to the flight feathers; that the breast was white, shading to grey on the lower breast and that, when it stood on a post, a distinct dark grey patch could be seen on the belly. On 5 October, EBJ saw the two birds distantly on posts. This was the last occasion when two were seen together.

On 10 October, EBJ saw one bird well and noted a blackish nape and cap, with some white on the crown, grey breast and a distinct rectangular dark patch on the belly. On 15 October, BDH saw one briefly on one of the usual posts, facing into the usual wind. It was standing back-on so that the colour of the belly could not be seen. The black of the head now had a precise lower margin which ran from the lores, below eye level to well down and across the nape, clearly a definite cap developing. The top of the crown was still mottled but showing much less white than previously, and the black did not quite reach the bill. There was now a bold contrast between the black through the eye and the white below it, which did not form a distinct white streak but extended down the cheeks to merge gradually into light grey, well down the sides of the neck. On 16 October,

BDH examined this bird again from back-on but at a slightly better angle so that much sooty feathering could be seen around and immediately behind the legs, contrasting rather sharply with the white undertail. The tail showed again as slightly forked, the whole upper surface seemed a uniform pale grey and the bill was an overall reddish grey. When the wings were stretched upwards once, the underwing was seen to be wholly white. It seemed that this was the bird which had not shown signs of moult on 1 October and that the other, which should have developed much more breeding plumage after two weeks and had had a few dusky feathers near the leading edge of the underwing, had gone.

On 19 October, A. H. Gollop saw the bird briefly and confirmed the even light grey upper surface, white underwing and undertail, and black cap not yet reaching the bill.

All observers saw something the the terns' feeding, although the winds made detailed views very difficult. The birds fed well out into the lake, sometimes joining the few Black-billed Gulls *(Larus bulleri)* present, which were very similar in colouring. No hawking at or near the surface was seen, the birds flying steadily into the wind some 3-4 m up, dropping occasionally in a splash dive with wings raised, not plunging like Caspian Terns *(Hydroprogne caspia)*.

No further visits could be made to the lake until mid-November when there were no terns to be found.

Previous years

Among his field notes, EBJ has records of birds at the lake in 1975 and 1976 which may have been Whiskered Terns. A field sketch of a bird seen twice in late August 1976 shows a complete black cap from bill to nape, with lower margin running from gape to eye, down beneath eye, back up to a point behind the middle of the eye, then back to fairly well down the nape. The bird was noted to look very white below the black cap. The bill was black with a slightly reddish tinge, slightly downcurved on top, the gonys visible about half-way along the lower mandible. The legs were dark purplish-red, looked rather long, with the hind toe overhanging the perching post. The wings when folded showed no dark lines but the primary tips were dark grey. In flight, the upper surface looked white, without black markings; the primaries and secondaries showed dusky tips on the underside. Its flight was reminiscent of a Caspian Tern but the bill was held at an angle rather than vertically and it fed by splashing on to the water.

In 1975, there were two birds in late June, one in July, up to four late July to mid-September, three from 15-19 September, two on 4 October. Details noted were inadequate for positive identification but suggest Whiskered rather than any other tern.

The 1978 bird

As vagrants sometimes return to the same place for several years in succession, Lake Horowhenua was watched with interest in 1978. No terns were seen up to and including the week of 20-27 May, when the lake was visited twice by A. H. Gollop and on the 27th by EBJ. On 28 May, BDH found a single Whiskered Tern preening and washing at the lake edge among resting Mallards *(Anas platyrhynchos)* and later roosting on the same most-favoured post as in 1977. The bird was in typical non-breeding plumage which remained unchanged throughout the winter months. It was seen closely on various dates by some 20 OSNZ members from Wellington and Manawatu regions and a good series of colour photographs was taken by H. A. Robertson (see Fig. 2). It was last seen on 28 September by A. H. Gollop, when its plumage was apparently unchanged.

During the winter months an unusually large number of Black-billed Gulls (over 100 on occasions) was on and about the lake, up to 30 resting on the grass verge of the lake in the centre of the public domain. Between feeding sessions, the tern frequently rested among these gulls and, although more wary than the gulls, could be studied closely from parked cars. Moreover, unlike in 1977, it was seen often on windless days and its characteristics could be better studied.

Although there was a selection of stakes, fences and buoys round the lake, the 1977 birds competed for an isolated stake well out in the water of the small bay at the northern end of the public domain. The 1978 bird began its stay using this stake but, with the arrival of wintering Black-billed Gulls, apparently preferred to rest among them on the domain turf, returning to the stake only if there were no gulls or if, on Sundays, there were too many people and dogs on the domain. From early August onwards, it was sometimes at the southern end of the lake on the outermost of a line of fence posts that extended into the lake. For example, on one day of cold westerly wind, G. A. Woodward and BDH at first saw the tern feeding with several gulls over the bay immediately south of the domain, later found it resting on the post at the southern end and, after the wind had dropped late in the day, found it on the usual stake north of the domain. Occasionally it rested elsewhere; once on the outermost of a line of fence posts at the southern end of the domain (P. M. Sagar & BDH); once on a small log floating near the domain (H. A. Robertson; Fig. 1); once, when the lake and the domain were being used for a regatta, the tern was found standing on a floating log in the quiet north-western arm of the lake.

A distinctive feature of the Whiskered Tern was its long legs, clearly visible even when it was hunched to face a strong wind. When alert or perching in windless conditions, its legs gave it a gull-like stance (see Fig. 1), quite unlike any other tern seen in New Zealand.

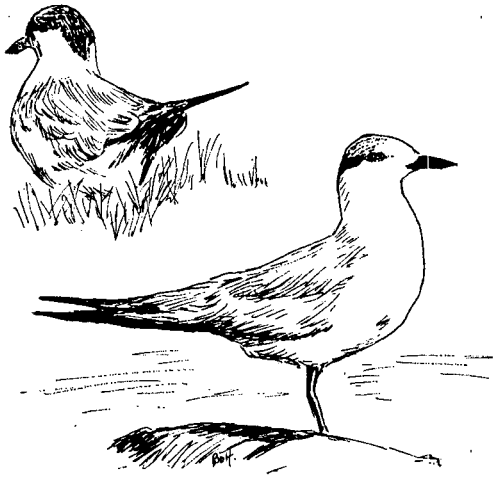

FIGURE 1 — Whiskered Tern at Lake Horowhenua, 1978, based on colour slides by H. A. Robertson. Note the longish legs and gull-like stance when alert. Leg-length obtained by superimposing the main slide, in which legs are partly obscured by grass, on a more distant view of the bird in same stance on a log offshore — legs accurate but feet too blurred to be exact. Upper sketch shows nape patch when head is bent forward.

Greater leg-length seemed to confer greater confidence, even a preference, to perch on the narrow top of a stake or fence post than has the conventional short-legged tern. The Black-fronted Tern *(C. albostriatus)*, for example, rests on the ground and will fly rather than walk even the shortest distances (C. Lalas, pers. comm.). When being observed too closely, the Whiskered Tern would walk, with waddling gait, through short grass or shallow puddle (Fig. 2) to a new position among the gulls. EBJ, wishing on one occasion to put it quietly to flight, found that it merely kept walking 10 m ahead of him.

In a wind, the bird would work up-wind steadily to feed, then fly quickly down-wind and start again. This is typical of all marsh terns. In calm conditions, it would often work a bay by repeated haphazard circling. Its flight was steady and direct, not buoyant, and at 3-6 m height. On seeing prey, it would stall and, with tail fully fanned, turn and fall lightly to the water, its body breaking the surface with a gentle splash, wings held upraised. No instance was seen of typical marsh tern feeding in which they drop to the water, hover briefly, then swoop or dip to pick an item from the surface, dabbing with the bill or immersing no more than bill and head. Whiskered Terns normally feed in this way but are known also to splash-dive, doubtless depending on the clarity of the water and the nature of the food. Swift (1960), while studying the Whiskered Tern

in the Camargue in southern France, found that splash-diving was the general rule (see also Ferguson-Lees 1969: 1044; Serventy *et al.* 1971: 203). Splash-diving is characteristic also of the Black-fronted Tern of New Zealand during periods of low prey abundance (C. Lalas, pers. comm.). The Horowhenua bird was seen to take small fish from time to time; presumably it was feeding mainly on fish in the lake's clear water rather than on insects on the surface.

Description of 1978 bird

Upper surface uniform pale silvery grey from hind-neck to tail; under surface, including axillaries and underwing, dull or slightly " dirty " white. General colouring very like that of Black-billed Gulls and, like them, often looking almost wholly white when in flight. Where the scapulars overlapped the coverts of the folded wing there was sometimes a misleading shadow which, from a distance, looked like a dark line across the wing. Primaries distinctly dark grey when folded but somehow not noticeable in flight. Tail much shorter than folded wing; precisely fan-shaped when fully expanded. A scattering of grey feathers on each side of the breast produced blurred grey patches below the leading edge of each wing. These feathers, presumably unmoulted breeding-plumage remnants, remained unchanged throughout the winter.

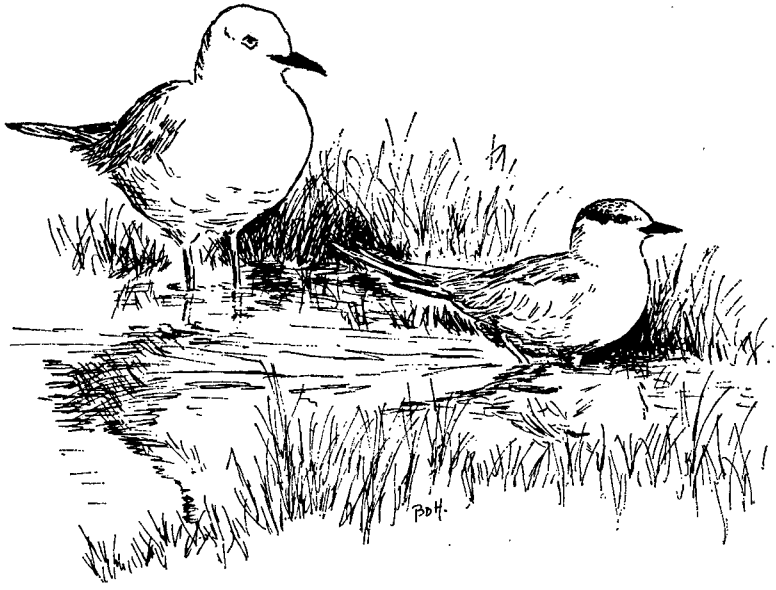

FIGURE 2 — Whiskered Tern with a Black-billed Gull at Lake Horowhenua, 1978. It is shifting position by walking agilely through a rainwater pool on the mown lakeside grass. From a colour slide by H. A. Robertson.

Unlike the 1977 birds, there was no clear sign of a start of moult into breeding plumage — for example, development of a more sharply defined black cap, of grey on lower neck and upper breast, of sooty belly-patch, of crimson bill or legs.

Apart from the white forehead and fore-crown, a complete "shadow" cap was visible. The only truly black areas were from lores to ear coverts, a broad band with blurred edges and noticed by EBJ to be interrupted with white when the bird's eyes were closed. When the head was held erect and during preening movements, the nape was seen to be heavily mottled blackish, ending in a sharp point (Fig. 1). When the head was held drawn into the shoulders in the hunched resting posture and also during flight, the mottled nape-feathers were compressed to produce the distinctive C-shaped black band from eye to eye. At close quarters it could be seen that the crown was not mottled but had a series of interrupted, longitudinal, blackish streaks (Fig. 1 & 2), characteristic of the species in winter.

The bill was fairly long and heavy, with a distinct gonys. Looking dark at a distance, at close quarters it was seen to be reddish-brown to blackish, depending on the light. The legs looked dark reddish-brown at a distance but at close quarters were distinctly dull red. The crimson tone seen in 1977 is typical of breeding plumage — crimson (Witherby *et al.* 1942); wine red (Serventy *et al.* 1971).

ORIGIN OF THE NEW ZEALAND BIRDS

The Whiskered Tern in its various forms is known to breed or have bred from Mediterranean Europe and Africa eastward through southern Russia to Kazakhstan and Iraq and perhaps Iran; in the lowlands of northern India; in China and Manchuria; in southern and eastern Africa and Madagascar; and in south-eastern Australia (Mees 1977). The detailed research of Mees (1977) shows that the true breeding and migratory ranges, the geographical variations and thus the nomenclature of the various populations of the Whiskered Tern are all far from clear. In this paper, the nomenclature of Mees (1977) at species level is used and also his adoption of *hybridus* as a masculine adjective rather than as a noun in apposition, *hybrida* (on the grounds that Pallas originally intended it to be an adjective).

Two races could conceivably reach New Zealand. The East Asian population, traditionally called *C. h. javanicus* but considered by Mees to be synonymous with the nominate Eurasian race *hybridus*, winters south to South-east Asia, the Philippines, Borneo, Java and, less commonly, the Celebes. It has not been recorded further east in the Moluccas and New Guinea, nor in Australia. Its occurrence in New Zealand is highly unlikely, especially as its period in breeding plumage, April to August, rules out all but a succession of first-year birds at Lake Horowhenua.

The Australian population is known to breed mainly in south-eastern Australia, partly in coastal areas but largely inland from October to February. Traditionally named *C. h. fluviatilis* Gould

1843, it has been concluded by Mees (1977: 45-47) that Horsfield's type specimen of *C. h. javanicus* is in fact a bird of the Australian race, collected in Java. This means that the Australian race becomes *C. h. javanicus* Horsfield 1821 and that the name *fluviatilis* Gould 1843 lapses. The Australian Whiskered Tern is the smallest and by far the palest race — in winter, whitish grey above (Light Gull Grey in Ridgway's 1912 colour standards), according to Mees (1977: 6), and slightly darker in summer plumage. It is in non-breeding plumage from roughly March/April to August/September. The remarkable paleness of the Horowhenua birds supports the view that they were Australian birds, as do the months in which they were present and the fact that visible moult into breeding plumage began in early October, perhaps delayed somewhat by the unusually southern latitude (40°37'S) at which they had wintered, roughly that of northern Tasmania. The Whiskered Tern is absent from Tasmania, the first record being of a vagrant in breeding plumage in late September 1967 (Wall 1970).

The Australian birds are strongly migratory, almost completely leaving southern Australia after breeding and moving northward to northern and north-eastern Australia, and beyond to New Guinea, the Moluccas, Celebes, Borneo and Java, straggling to the Philippines (Mees 1977). Apart from ample specimens, there is the evidence of a bird banded as a chick in New South Wales and recovered in Java and of another banded as a chick in western Victoria and recovered in New Guinea. In part of the winter range they overlap the non-breeding range of Asian birds and in Java at least both races occur in similar numbers, though largely at different times. Whereas Asian birds are present (judging from specimen records cited by Mees) from October to May, Australian birds are present from May to September. However, many first-year birds may retain their 'winter' plumage and remain in the region during the adults' breeding seasons. Mees cites J. van den Assem (1960, *Ardea* 48: 178-182) as having observed the Whiskered Tern in northern New Guinea in 1957-1959 between April and early November, with breeding plumage being assumed towards the end of their stay. Collecting dates of the 13 specimens from New Guinea in Leiden Museum of Natural History range 13 May to 19 September (Mees 1977).

The New Zealand birds, wintering in a contrary direction and in very different climatic conditions from the majority, would be considered vagrants were there not signs that they may occur with some regularity. For example, a further bird was recorded in 1978 in the South Auckland district (see Brown & Habraken, elsewhere in this issue).

MARSH TERNS IN WINTER PLUMAGE

BLACK-FRONTED TERN *Chlidonias albostriatus*

So obviously different in the field from Whiskered Tern as barely to deserve comparison. Immediately distinguished by its dark

grey upper surface, with vividly contrasting white rump in all plumages (C. Lalas, pers. comm.); its grey undersurface, including underwing; its orange bill; its short legs which, in all plumages, are orange (C. Lalas, pers. comm.). Non-breeding plumage, worn January/February to April/May (C. Lalas, pers. comm.), changes mainly about the head: the bill darkens, the forehead, fore-crown and throat become white, the cap becomes mottled, looking overall grey, with a smudgy blackish line extending from lores through eye to nape.

BLACK TERN *Chlidonias niger*

Breeds in Eurasia from Spain to Yenesei River in western Asia and also across central North America. It is the least likely of marsh terns to occur in New Zealand, although there have been two sightings in New South Wales (Serventy *et al.* 1971). Breeding plumage distinctive: upper surface uniform smoky grey, head and body black, underwing and undertail white, bill black, legs reddish-brown. In full non-breeding plumage, it is uniform brownish-grey above, darker than the others, white below, with a diagnostic dark patch that extends from the leading edge of the mantle down on to the white shoulder in front of the wing. There is a fairly large black patch on crown, nape and ear-coverts and a small one in front of the eye; forehead white. A white collar crosses the hind-neck between black cap and brown mantle.

WHITE-WINGED BLACK TERN *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Breeds from eastern Europe to central Siberia; a separate population in eastern Siberia, presumably the source of migrants to Australasia. The breeding plumage is well known in New Zealand (Sibson 1954, Pierce 1974): black on head, mantle, body and under wing-coverts; grey on flight feathers; white on upper wing-coverts, rump, tail and under tail; bill dark red, legs reddish-black.

Whereas the general sequence of change into breeding plumage of the Australian Whiskered Tern is " the black cap and some darker shades on the belly appear first, then the belly darkens and the bill turns red," that of the White-winged Black is " (a) black underwing coverts (b) black head and body (c) white upperwing coverts (d) red bill " (Hansen 1976).

It is the Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns that have traditionally been indistinguishable in winter plumage. This tradition probably dates from Witherby *et al.* (1949) who stated that they are " probably not separable . . . in the field." This comment has been echoed by European and African texts ever since. However, Williamson (1960) and Ferguson-Lees (1969) have shown that, with care and close observation, they can be distinguished in Europe — mainly by the white hind-neck " collar," almost square tail, white rump and tail during moult and black ear coverts isolated from streaked crown in the White-winged Black Tern. The bill of White-winged Black is short and stubby, much shorter than the head, whereas the male Whiskered Tern has a much longer bill, almost as long as the head,

with a pronounced gonys similar to that of sea-terns *(Sterna)*, while the female has a much shorter bill, only slightly longer and more robust than that of White-winged Black (Williamson 1960).

These authors were working with European and African birds. From records published in Australia and New Zealand, it seems that field differences are greater in the populations of both species that occur in Australasia than they are in Europe. The Australian Whiskered Tern has the distinctive head pattern already described, apparently the same as in European birds, but its upper surface is very pale. The White-winged Black Tern seen in Australasia seems to differ in head pattern from European birds, although no comparative study is available. Plate 8 in Smythies (1960) shows the different head pattern of the two species, even though the text makes the usual remark that they are not separable in the field. Hamilton (1957) gave a clear sequence of plumage stages seen during the 1956-57 irruption of White-winged Black Terns into southern Queensland. On arrival in October, there was only a black patch around the eye, which had disappeared by early December, so that the birds were merely pale grey and white. By late December, black head markings had re-appeared in the form so familiar to New Zealand observers, in which there is a small triangle of black in front of the eye, making the eye look larger and smudgy, and a broad black band from the ear-coverts of one side straight up and across the hind-crown and down to the ear-coverts on the other side. There is also a black band that runs from the black on the hind-crown down to the nape where it becomes slightly wider. This marking appeared on all Queensland birds and lasted through to March when the development of black, which had begun on under wing-coverts and later on the body, merged with the head markings (see series of photographs in Hamilton 1957, Plate 16).

Birds described in New Zealand have shown not only these distinctive head markings but also a dark band across the forward edge of the mantle, another slightly behind the leading edge of the upper wing, dusky primaries and inner secondaries and a prominent white leading edge to the wing when seen in flight from in front, interrupted by dark at the carpal bend, visible also on the folded wing (see sketches in Sibson 1954, Fleming 1955 and Plate XXV in Wakelin 1968; also Hamilton 1957, Plate 16). These birds were not immatures in their first year. They may have been second-year birds but it is not known whether the markings are really features of non-breeding adults of the East Siberian population.

" SEA-TERNS " IN TAIL MOULT

There is little chance of confusing Whiskered Tern with Arctic *(Sterna paradisaea)* or Common *(S. hirundo)* Terns in non-breeding plumage, even when a tail moult may deprive them of their normal deeply forked tails. These terns are distinctly larger in size and proportionately shorter and weaker in leg. The white of their underparts extends as a collar across the hind-neck, contrasting, as do the white

upper tail-coverts and tail, with the grey of mantle, back and wings. Black is extensive on nape and crown, white being confined mainly to forehead and fore-crown. Their flight is light and buoyant and they feed often by diving from a considerable height. The habitat of the Common is both coastal, including harbours and estuaries, and maritime and of Arctic largely maritime.

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SHORT NOTES

WHISKERED TERN ON LOWER WAIKATO RIVER

An unusual tern first seen on 27 August 1978 by Anton Habraken and a junior member, Ian Southey, stayed for about a month near Hood's Landing, on the lower Waikato River. It was seen by a woman whitebaiter in mid-August and remained until 17 September.

In the lower reaches, 8 km from its mouth, the river is tidal and about 3 km wide. Many islands covered in tangled willow, alder, reeds and weeds divide it into a maze of channels. The tern frequented a blind channel close to the boat ramp and parking area of Hood's Landing, which is on a main channel. It could be watched from the landing without difficulty. Many boats are launched and landed there. The banks are dotted with whitebaiters' shelters, one of which gave us a vantage point.

AH returned with B. Brown on 29 August, when we were fortunate in having the bird present for about 40 minutes. During half this time it rested 30 m distant on water weed in sunlight. Telescopes of X 75 and X 15 - 60 were used, full notes and sketches made and the bird identified as a Whiskered Tern *(Chlidonias hybrida).*