

Terns



Photos by Greg Lavaty

Order: Charadriiformes (includes shorebirds, alcids, skuas)

Family: Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers) – 23 genera, 97 species worldwide

- 44 species of terns in 10 genera worldwide
- Breed on every continent, including Antarctica!
- Arctic Tern breeds around the Arctic ocean, winters in pack ice off Antarctica
- Annual round trip of 40,000 km

Eight Texas Terns

◆ Large Terns

- Caspian (21 inches, 660 g)

❖ Crested Terns

- Royal (20 inches, 470 g)
- Sandwich (15 inches, 210 g)

◆ Upland Terns

- Gull-billed (14.6 inches, 201 g)

◆ Medium Terns

- Forster's (13.4 inches, 160 g)
- Common (12.6 inches, 120 g)

◆ Small Terns

- Black (9.6 inches, 62 g)
- Least (8.9 inches, 45 g)

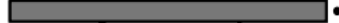
Rare Texas Terns

- ◆ Arctic (17 accepted records TBRC)
- ◆ Elegant (16 accepted records TBRC)
- ◆ Bridled (regular pelagic, rare on coast)
- ◆ Sooty (uncommon pelagic, rare on coast)
- ◆ Roseate (2 accepted records TBRC)
- ◆ Brown Noddy (29 accepted records TBRC)
- ◆ Black Noddy (5 accepted records TBRC)

Upper Texas Coast Terns

[illegible]

Central Texas Terns

			Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Least Tern		E					• • •			 •	•			
Caspian Tern		E	•	•					? •	? ? ?	• • •	•		
Black Tern						•		• • •	• 	• • •	•	•	•	
Common Tern			•				• •			•	• • •			
Forster's Tern							• •	• •	• •	• •				

Tern Identification

Caution!

- ◇ Most terns are not hard to identify, but there are few diagnostic field marks. It requires a diagnosis!
- ◇ Many 1- and 2-year old birds look different from adults, not well depicted in most field guides.
- ◇ Most terns have a unique molt pattern. Inner primaries may be molted twice a year, creating confusing wing patterns. Older primaries are darker!

Tern Identification

What to look for

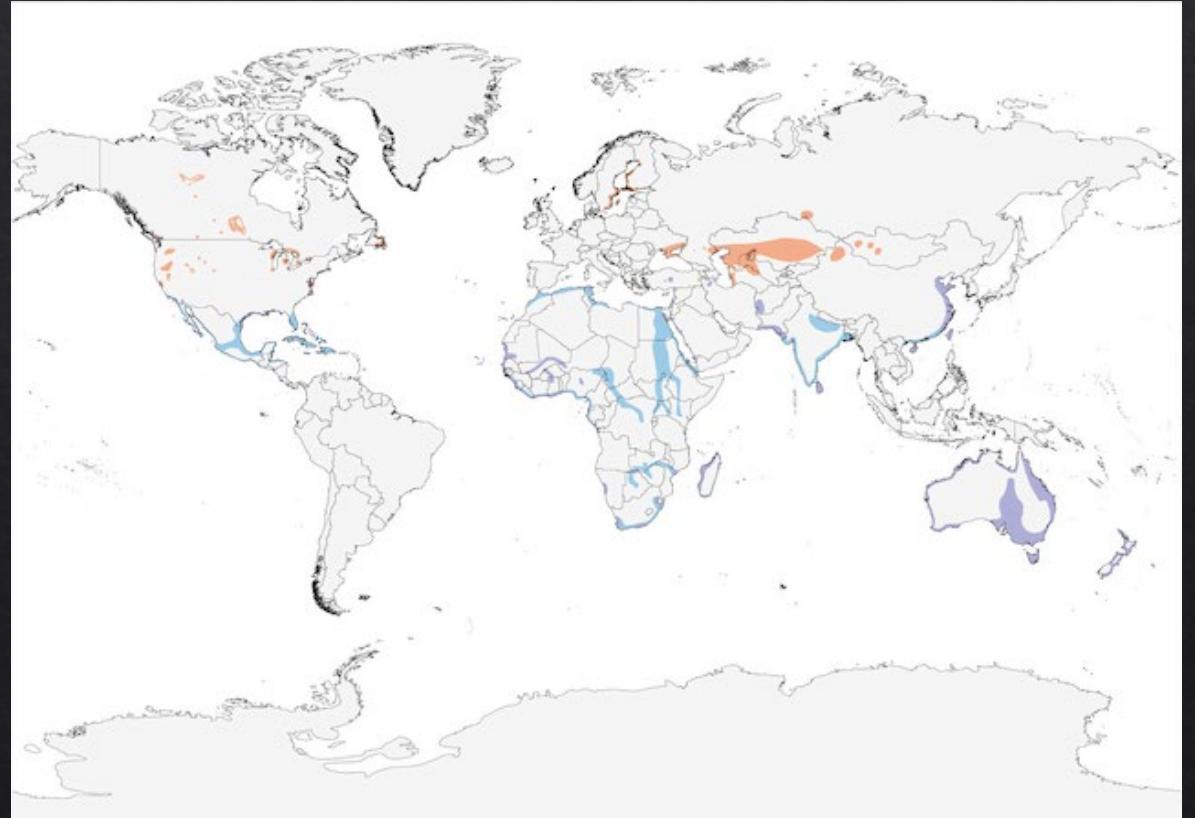
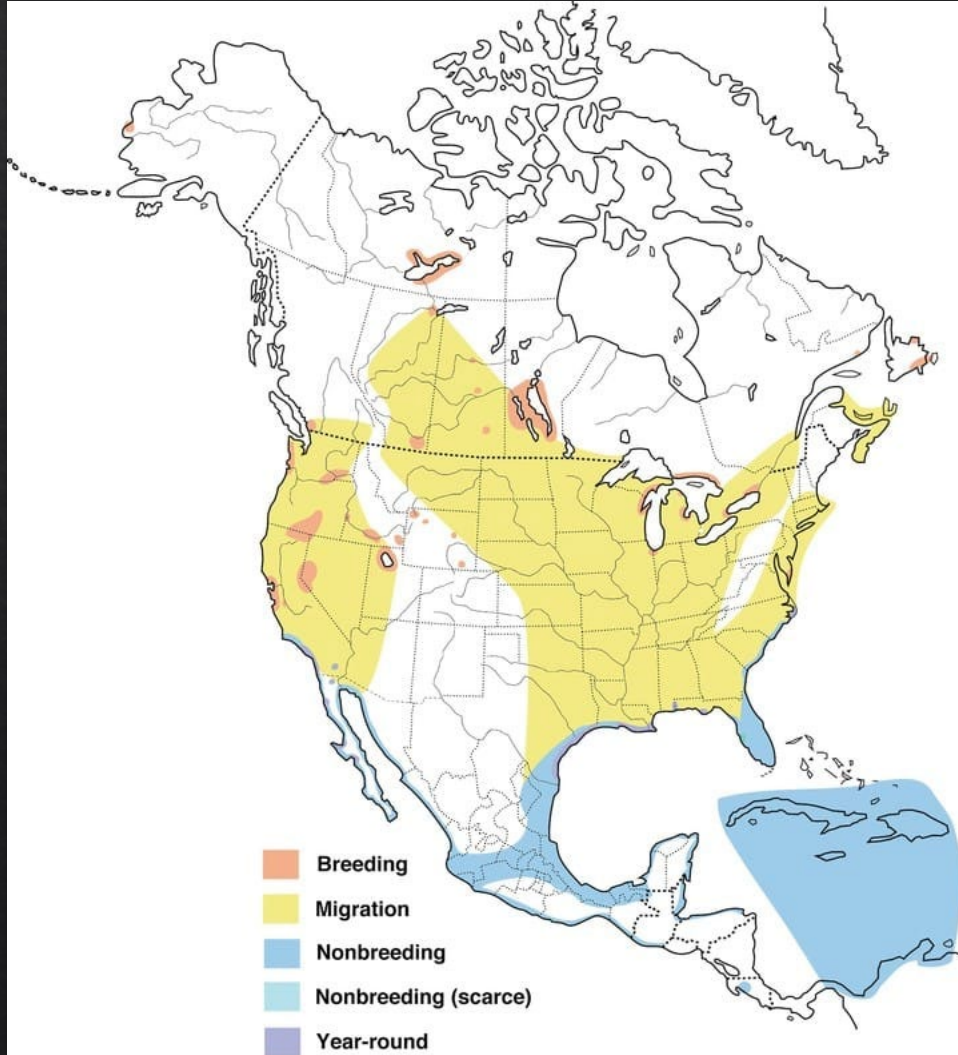
- ◇ Size and shape at rest – especially head and bill, also leg length
- ◇ Shape and actions in flight – head size and tail length, wing shape
- ◇ Foraging behavior – plunge-diving, plucking from water surface, hawking insects
- ◇ Bill shape and color – helpful in some cases; color is subject to seasonal variation
- ◇ Tail shape and pattern – length of tail, how forked is it
- ◇ General tone of body plumage – shades of gray useful in direct comparison

Caspian Tern



Caspian Tern

- “The Big Red-billed One”
- Beaches, sand bars, tidal flats
- More solitary than most terns



Caspian Tern



Breeding Plumage

- Massive red bill with black tip
- Size and bulk of a gull
- Short tail, front heavy

Caspian Tern

- Very long, broad wings
- Bulky body, short tail
- Front heavy
- Flight is gull-like



Caspian Tern

Dark under primaries



Caspian Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

- White streaked forehead

Caspian Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

Crested Terns



Royal Tern



Royal Tern

- “The Friar Tern”
- Beaches, flats, sand bars
- Abundant on coast
- Rare away from coast



Royal Tern



Breeding Plumage

- Sleek, lean structure
- Moderately-heavy, entirely orange bill
- Shaggy crest

Royal Tern



All black cap held briefly in
Apr-May

Royal Tern



Most of the year have Friar
Tuck crest, white forehead

Royal Tern

Bill may appear yellowish, esp.
on young birds



Royal Tern

- Wings long and narrow
- Body even and tubular
- Bill points straight ahead

Medium
Forked tail



Royal Tern

- Flies higher than smaller terns
- Plunge dives from 20-30 feet



Royal Tern

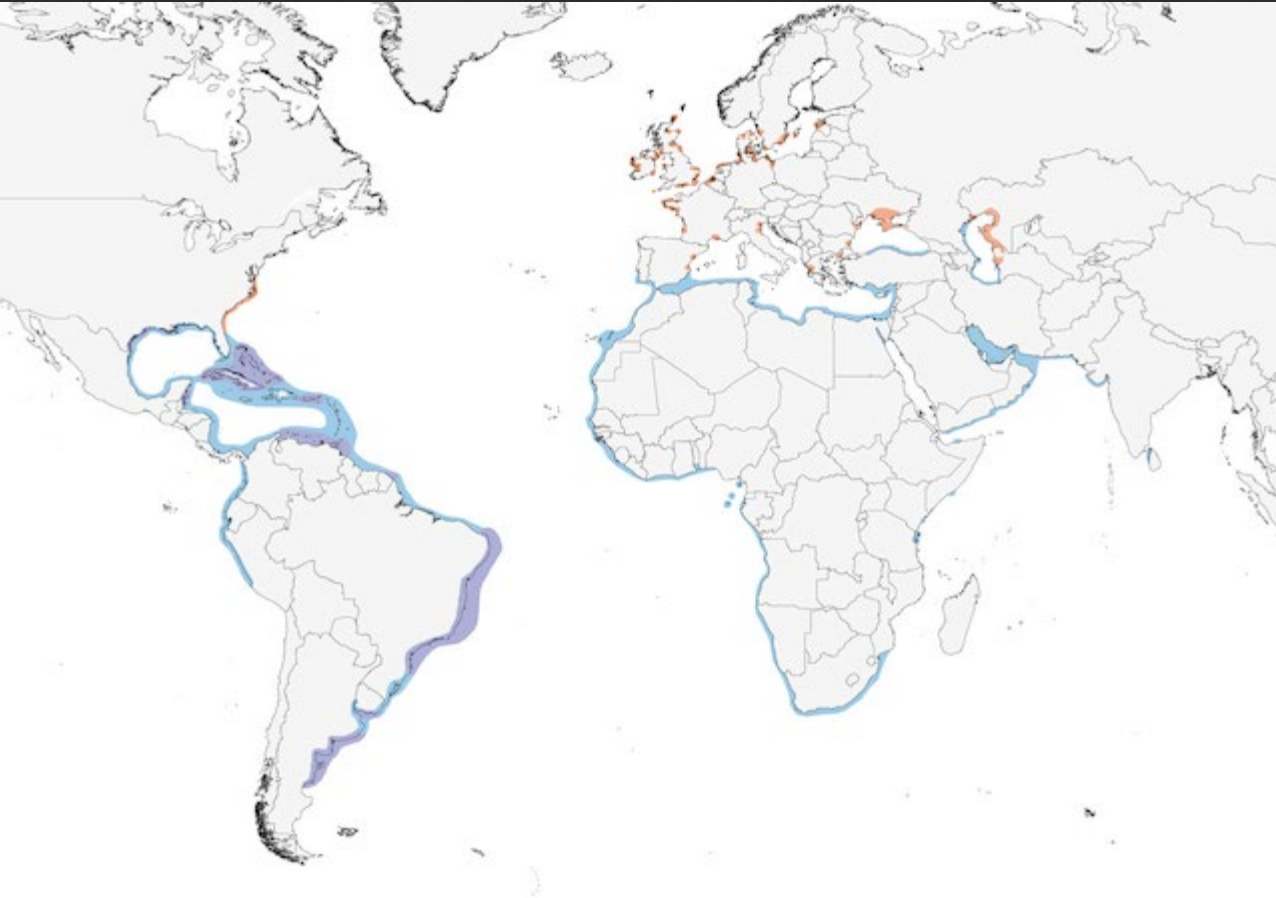


- Common and gregarious on beaches

Sandwich Tern



Sandwich Tern



- “With Mustard on Its Bill”
- Beaches, sand bars, tidal flats
- Strictly coastal

Sandwich Tern

Breeding Plumage

- Slender body
- Long thin black bill with yellow tip
- Shaggy crest



Sandwich Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

- White forehead
- Shaggy crest at nape

Sandwich Tern



Juvenile Plumage

- Orangish bill

Sandwich Tern



Long narrow
wings

Lean balanced
body

Sandwich Tern

Slender body and
long angular wings



Gull-billed Tern



Gull-billed Tern



- “Laughing Tern”
- Less tied to water than other terns
- Forages for insects over dry land
- Fresh and salt marshes, flooded rice fields
- Less common on beaches

Gull-billed Tern

Breeding Plumage

- Stocky build
- Short, heavy black bill
- Domed head



Gull-billed Tern

- Bulkier and blockier than other medium terns
- Dome-shaped head



Gull-billed Tern



- Very broad wings, hand long and tapered
- Short slightly-forked tail
- Heavy bill generally pointed down

Gull-billed Tern



- Upper wing uniform silvery-gray
- Body uniform and tubular in shape
- Snatches prey from surface of water and hawks insects

Gull-billed Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

- Black smudge through eye, less distinct than Forster's

Gull-billed Tern



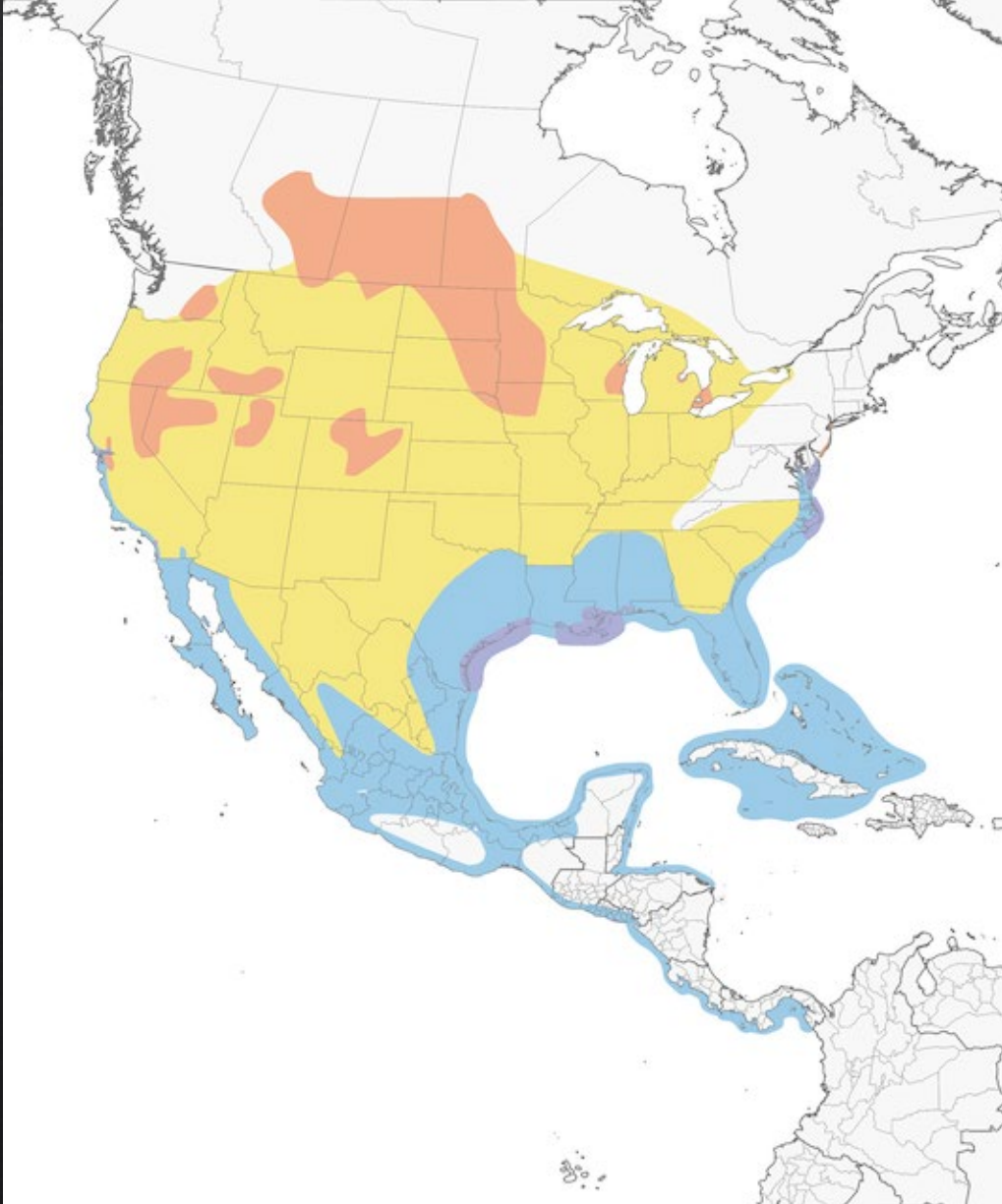
Medium Terns



Forster's Tern



Forster's Tern



- “White-breasted Tern”
- A marsh tern – breeds in fresh and salt marshes
- Winters along coast, inland lakes

Forster's Tern

- Black cap and nape
- Orange bill with dark tip



Breeding Plumage

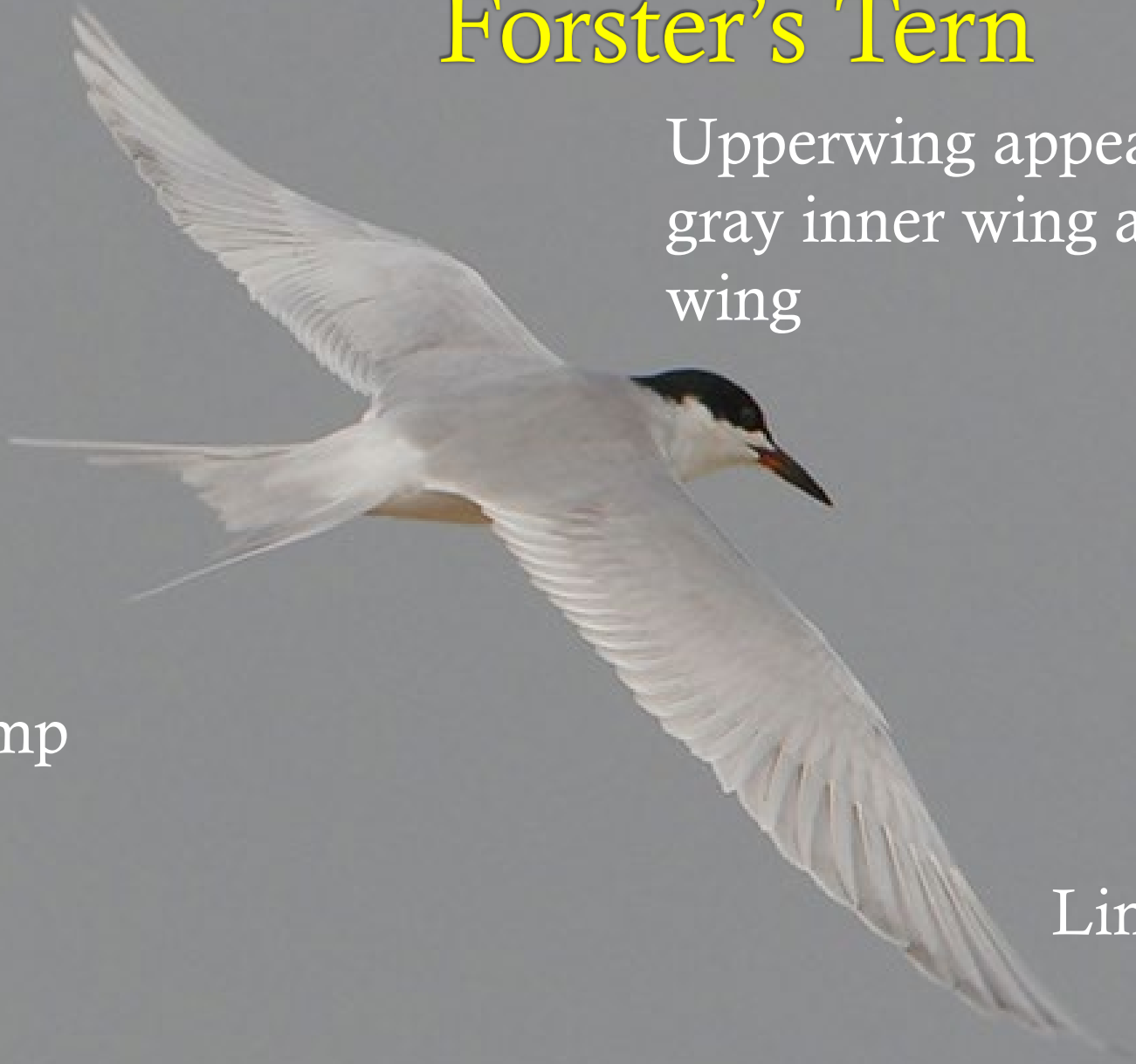
- Pale gray above, snow white below
- Silvery primaries paler than mantle
- Long tail projects beyond wing tips

Forster's Tern

Upperwing appears two-toned, pale gray inner wing and silvery white outer wing

White rump

Limited dark on primaries



Forster's Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

- Black eye patches
- Dark bill
- Dark outer primaries when worn

Forster's Tern

May have variable dark
streaking on nape

Orange legs



Forster's Tern

Some birds (esp. 1st year birds)
may retain significant dark on
nape



Forster's Tern



Note two-toned appearance of
upperwing

May have dark primary tips when worn

Forster's Tern



Juvenile Plumage

- Ginger-brown markings on back
- Brown wears away quickly

Forster's Tern



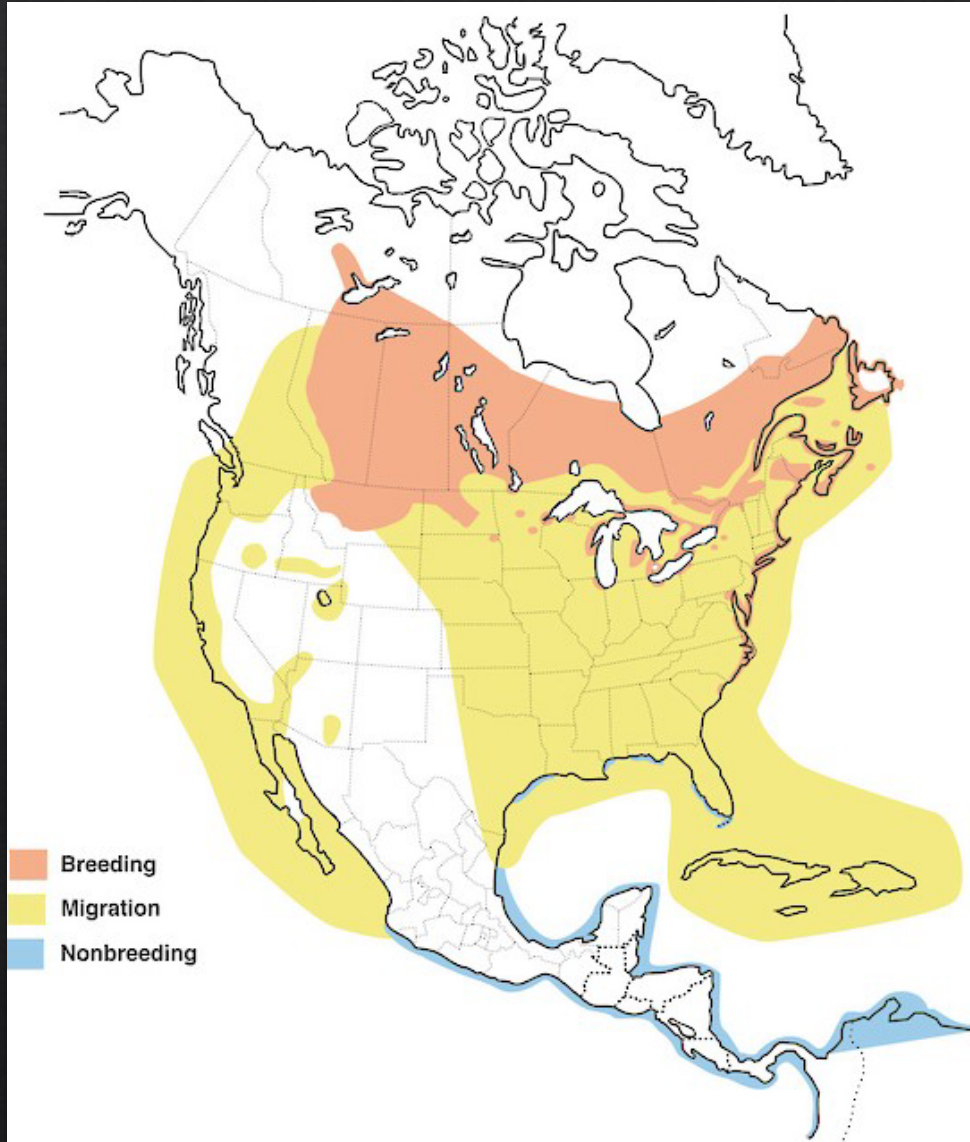
Worn Juvenile Plumage

- Dark-centered tertials

Common Tern



Common Tern



- “Gray-breasted Tern”
- Nests in huge colonies on islands in lakes and rivers
- More strictly coastal than Forster’s
- On the TX coast, can be more common than Forster’s during Apr-May
- Many birds summer, often 2nd year birds in basic plumage

Common Tern

- Black cap and nape
- Red-orange bill with dark tip



Breeding Plumage

- Medium gray above, gray below
- Usually dark primaries
- Tail usually does not project beyond wings

Common Tern



Upperwing more evenly
colored than Forster's

Usually shows dark
wedge on primaries

Common Tern

Nonbreeding Plumage

- White forehead with dark hindcrown
- Dark carpal bar
- Dark bill



Common Tern



- White forehead with dark hindcrown
- Dark wedge on primaries

Common Tern



Dark carpal bar

Molting primary

Worn dark primaries

Common Tern

Brown on back

Fresh Juvenile Plumage



Common Tern

Dark carpal bar

Worn Juvenile



Forster's



Photo by Joseph Kennedy



Common



Photo by Pedro Nicolau



Common and Forster's







Small Terns



Least Tern



Least Tern

- “Easily Piqued Beach Pixie”
- Sandy beaches



Least Tern

Breeding Plumage

- Tiny but stocky
- Long bright yellow bill, yellow legs
- White forehead



Least Tern

Juvenile Plumage

- Dark bill
- Dark mask and nape



Least Tern



Least Tern



Quick stiff wingbeats
Unstable flight

- Large body and long slender wings
- Short tail, long head and bill
- Two dark primaries

Least Tern

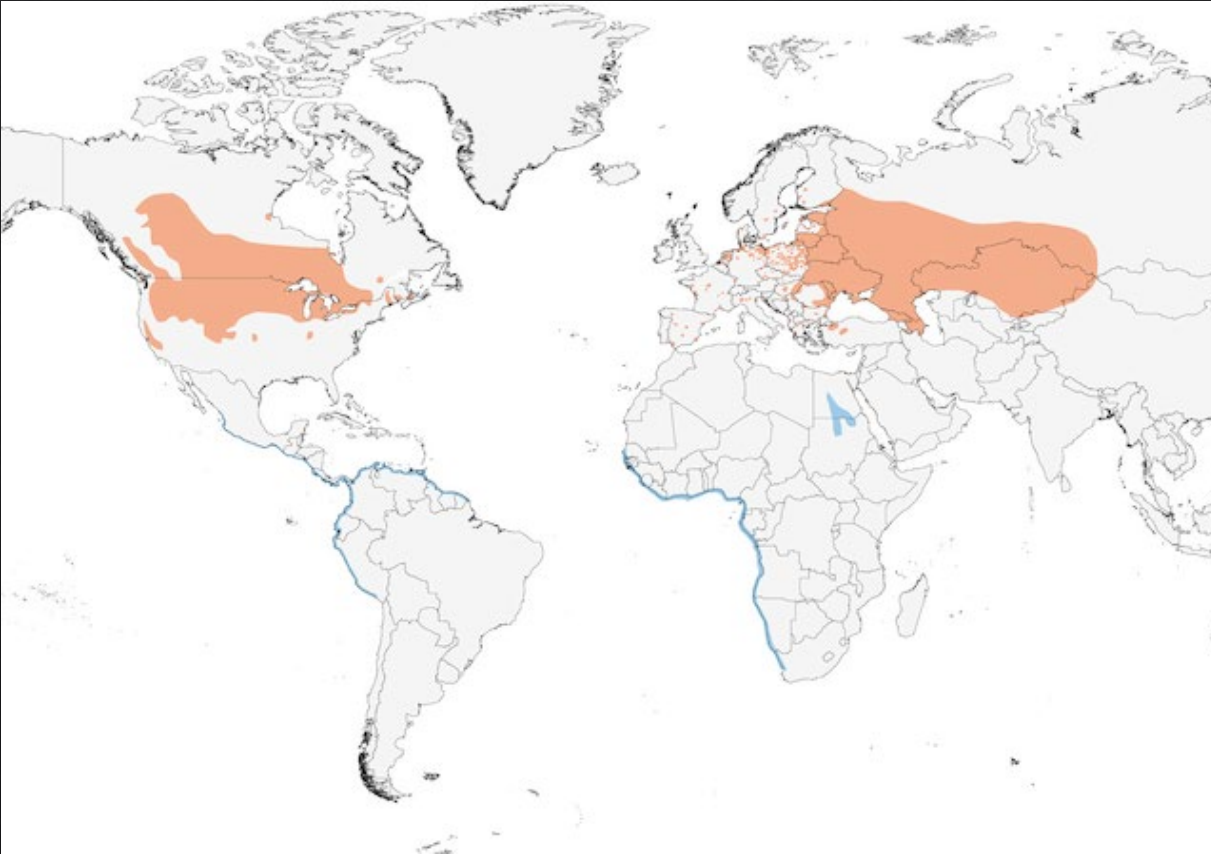


Black Tern



Black Tern

- “Shadow of a Tern”
- Breeds in freshwater marshes
- Fresh and marine habitats, dry fields



Black Tern

- Small and compact
- Round head

Breeding Plumage

- Black head and body
- Shiny gray wings
- White undertail



Black Tern



Nonbreeding Plumage

- Black helmet with ear muffs
- Smoky gray upperparts

Black Tern



- Buoyant and bouncy flight
- Picks prey off surface
- Broad wings, curved on leading edge of hand
- Short slightly-forked tail

Black Tern



Quiz



































