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Terns

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This is a brief introduction to the tern group outlining the number of species breeding (6) and the number of regular non-breeders (8) in southern Africa. Terns are a neglected group for which much data on occurrence around both coastlines and inland still needs to be collected. Terns are difficult birds to catch for ringing purposes as nocturnal roosts are hard to find, but once found terns are easy to mistnet. The large numbers of recoveries for

a few species (Common, Arctic and Sandwich) indicate only that these populations are heavily ringed in Europe. Ringing in southern Africa can help fill in the knowledge gaps about the breeding grounds and the staging posts along the migration routes. Of southern African species only the Swift Tern has been ringed in large numbers.

A series of colour slides was shown of birds handled in southern Africa and in Aus-

Slides of Australian slides showed some of the most interesting races captured during wader and tern expeditions to the northwest of the country and featured Gull-billed Tern, (both the local and Asiatic race, the latter previously unrecognised but for a single specimen), the first record of the north Indian Ocean race (*velox*) of Swift Tern for Australia and both the local and Asiatic races of the Whiskered Tern, the latter also the first record for Australia. Photos of breeding Caspian Tern in Namibia were shown. This led to a short discourse on how little we really know about this species here, especially the populations of Namibia, the Western Cape and the interior of South Africa and Botswana. Slides of Swift Tern showed the nominate South African race (*bergii*) as well as the East African race (*thalassinus*). These, when compared with the slide of *velox*, illustrated the enormous variation in colouration of the upperparts between the races. The full extent of the movements of the two African races is still not clear and more work needs to be carried out along the east coast as far as Mozambique.

Slides of Lesser Crested Tern in Australia showed birds in both non-breeding and breeding plumage and it was surmised that the latter may have been a migrant from further north in the Indian Ocean as it was a lone specimen at a time when all other birds were in non-breeding plumage. Different Sandwich Terns of known origin and age were shown in the hand and the various stages of primary moult could be seen clearly. Slides were also shown of both the nominate race of Common Tern from Europe as well as the

Siberian race *longipennis*, sometimes known as the Black-billed Tern as it does not attain the red base to the bill in breeding dress. The problems of field and hand identification of Arctic Terns were addressed on the basis of the rather limited photographic evidence.

The study of Antarctic and Roseate Terns presently underway on Bird Island in Algoa Bay was discussed with an indication of the colour flagging that was to start this winter. Very little is known of the Antarctic Tern and the origin of birds visiting the south coast of South Africa is far from clear despite the fact that there have been two ringing recoveries from the Western Cape to Gough and Kerguelen Islands. The age of the population visiting our waters may be heavily skewed towards immature age groups, with adults staying on or closer to their breeding grounds and juveniles of the year straying far north only in small numbers. Two aspects of Roseate Tern biology are presently being studied: population dynamics, and the extent of movement after breeding is completed. This aspect is being investigated by regular observations along the coast both to the east and west.

Pictures were shown of adult and juvenile Bridled Terns from Penguin Island in Western Australia. This population is well studied by researchers from Murdoch University and this is indicated by the number of both metal-ringed and colour-ringed birds to be seen and by the tameness of the birds in the study area. Elsewhere on the island birds were much less tame. Slides of Little, Damara and Black Terns as well as African Skimmer in the hand were also discussed.

See also the article in Bird Numbers 9: 17-19. Southern African terns and their mysteries by T. Tree. (Ed.)
