

Bird Watch on the Palmer Divide

Forster's tern: *Sterna forsteri*



By Elizabeth Hacker

As fall breezes bring a chill to the Palmer Divide, summer songbirds that nested here over the summer have headed south. Many birds are gone but there are still opportunities to see late-migrating species, including the Forster's Tern, which is sometimes called Foster's Tern.

Migration

Unlike many species of tern that fly internationally, the Forster's tern migrates exclusively in North America from its breeding range as far north as Manitoba, Canada, to its winter home on both coasts of Central America. Small flocks of Forster's terns have been known to nest in Colorado's wetlands, but the majority makes brief stops here during spring and fall migration.

In the fall, the best time to look for this bird is from mid-September through October before or after a major weather front blows in, which often grounds migrating birds for a few days.

Description

Terns look like a small gull. They are both members of the Lardae family of birds, which includes terns, gulls, and skimmers. Though they maybe cousins, have similar coloring, and are often found together, terns have a more delicate appearance and behave much differently than gulls. A tern's body is streamlined, its beak is long and pointed, wings are narrow and tapered, and posture more horizontal than the upright posture of most gulls.

The Forster's tern is a medium-size tern, about 14 inches long with a 30-inch wingspan. Both sexes look alike. Its coloration varies depending on seasonality and age. Basically, it is bright white on its undersides and all around its neck. Upper back, wings, and tail are pale gray from the shoulders down to the tip of its tail. One distinctive characteristic is the Forster's forked tail.

In the spring, a breeding bird has a black cap, bright orange legs, and a red beak that is black at the tip. In fall the Forster's tern's black cap is reduced to a comma-shaped black mask over its eyes and those vivid orange legs and red beak have dulled and appear grayish.

Habitat and diet

Though delicate in appearance, the Forster's tern is a hardy bird that dives for small fish. It is a social bird that congregates in small flocks and nests in marshes. In summer it is primarily found in freshwater environments, while in winter it is more commonly found near saltwater. The Forster's tern is different from other terns in that it dives directly into the upper surface of the water, often from a nearby perch. Many other species of tern hover over the water looking for fish and fly just above the surface with open beaks skimming for fish but never dive below the surface.

The Forster's tern has adapted to human activities, including agriculture and fishing. It is often seen flying above crops eating insects, behind fishing boats diving for discarded small fish, or plunging in fishery ponds for fry. It is not uncommon to see terns pestering another bird, like an osprey, that has a catch in its beak or talons. If the bird drops its catch, a tern quickly swoops down to steal it. Unlike its cousins, a tern will only eat freshly caught food and avoids carrion and the garbage gulls consume.



Above: Painting by Elizabeth Hacker of Forster's Terns. A color version is posted at www.ocn.me/v12n10bird.htm.

Courtship and nesting

I've seen photographs of elaborate courtship displays depicting pairs performing gracefully in the air. I've observed courting males bringing fish to their prospective mates. It's almost comical how the female expects the male to return in a timely manner with more fish. If he's not quick enough, she scolds him rather harshly and she may look for a different male.

The Forster's tern is reported to be colonial nester, which means it nests in groups. While this may be true, I've only observed single nests. Kayaks allow birders to get closer to birds, but when I got too close to a loosely constructed floating nest in a marsh in northern Minnesota, the pair began vocalizing and flying toward me in an effort to move me away from their nest.

The female lays three to four brownish eggs and incubates them for about three weeks while the male brings food to the nest. Chicks are hatched with open eyes and downy feathers and rely on their parents to feed them for about a month.

Where did it get that name?

The Forster's tern was named in honor Johann Reinhold Forster, an early 18th-century German Lutheran pastor and naturalist who made significant contributions to early ornithology. I enjoy reading journals of people like Forster who endured incredibly harsh conditions to pursue their quest for knowledge. Forster and his son Georg were the scientists on the second Pacific voyage of James Cook that set sail in 1772 and returned three years later.

During this expedition, the Forsters kept detailed journals and preserved specimens of the birds they found. Forster later published his findings in a publication *Observations Made During a Voyage round the World*. Apparently it didn't make the best-sellers list because Johann fell into bankruptcy after using all his earnings

to publish it.

Though not a money maker, this book was so well regarded that Forster was later appointed professor of natural history and director of the botanic garden at Halle University, which at that time was one of only a few institutions to study the natural sciences.

Today, many universities conduct research and offer degrees in ornithology and other natural sciences. Fortunately, improved technology no longer requires scientists to kill birds in order to study them. Binoculars and scopes allow close observation from a safe distance. High speed cameras with long lenses capture birds in many different poses and environments, allowing us a glimpse into their world. Small tracking devices can be safely attached to birds to allow scientists to track the movement and the life spans of birds. These are only a few of the innovations that have advanced our knowledge of birds, but as scientists learn more, they realize how much more there is to discover about these amazing little creatures.

Elizabeth Hacker is a writer and artist. Email her at elizabethhacker@ocn.me to share bird pictures and stories.

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