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Distinguishing between Roseate and Common Terns at breeding colonies in the West Indies

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Photos: Michiel Oversteegen

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Abstract This note addresses the widespread confusion between breeding Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*) and Common Terns (*S. hirundo*) in the West Indies, and reviews field identification and breeding distribution of the two species in the region.

Keywords breeding distribution, Caribbean, Common Tern, field identification, Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii*, *Sterna hirundo*

Resumen Distinguir entre la Gaviota Rosada y la Gaviota Común en colonias de cría en el Caribe Insular • En la presente nota se aborda la confusión generalizada entre la Gaviota Rosada (*Sterna hirundo*) y la Gaviota Común (*S. hirundo*) en el Caribe Insular; y se examina la identificación en el campo y la distribución de cría de las dos especies en la región.

Palabras clave Caribe, distribución de cría, Gaviota Común, Gaviota Rosada, identificación de campo, *Sterna dougallii*, *Sterna hirundo*

Résumé Distinction entre la Sterne de Dougall et la Sterne pierregarin dans les colonies de reproduction des Antilles • Cette note porte sur la confusion largement répandue entre la Sterne de Dougall (*Sterna dougallii*) et la Sterne pierregarin (*S. hirundo*) qui se reproduisent dans les Antilles, et passe en revue l'identification sur le terrain et l'aire de reproduction des deux espèces dans la région.

Mots clés aire de reproduction, Caraïbes, identification sur le terrain, *Sterna dougallii*, *Sterna hirundo*, Sterne de Dougall, Sterne pierregarin

There has been widespread confusion in the past between Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*) and Common Terns (*S. hirundo*) in the West Indies and Bahamas. This confusion probably arose because early field guides (e.g., Bond *et al.* 1960 and subsequent editions) depicted the Roseate Tern as having a black bill and the Common Tern as having a red bill with a black tip. In fact, breeding Roseate Terns only have black bills in the USA, Canada and western Europe. Caribbean Roseate Terns have black bills when they first arrive at breeding sites in May, but have red-and-black bills (sometimes all red) throughout incubation and chick-rearing (Gochfeld and Burger 2020). Although current field guides (e.g., Raffaele 1998 and subsequent editions, Hallett 2006) correctly depict the bill color of Caribbean Roseate Terns, the existence of many erroneous published records of 'Common Terns' nesting in the Caribbean and Bahamas (Arnold *et al.* 2020) has led to a self-fulfilling expectation that this species will be found nesting at other locations.

Besides bill color, several other field characters separate Roseate and Common Terns in breeding plumage. Roseate Terns

are much paler, with long white tail 'streamers,' very little black in the wingtips except for the narrow edges of the outer primaries, and creamy white underparts; the pink color that gives the species its name is rarely visible in the field. Common Terns have shorter tails with gray outer edges, darker gray upperparts, gray underparts, and extensive black in the wingtips visible from both below and above. Caribbean Roseate Terns usually lay single eggs with a variable number of two-egg clutches; however, Common Terns usually lay two or three eggs, rarely one. In newly-hatched chicks, Roseate Terns have down that sticks together in tufts so that chicks appear 'spiky' or 'hairy,' while Common Terns have loose down so that chicks appear 'fluffy.' In older chicks, Roseate Terns have black legs whereas Common Terns have pale pink or orange legs (Gochfeld and Burger 2020, Arnold *et al.* 2020).

Roseate Terns breed in colonies on many small islands throughout the Bahamas and the eastern Caribbean from Puerto Rico east and south to Tobago, but are scarce and local in other parts of the Caribbean (Gochfeld and Burger 2020). There is a well-documented population of Common Terns breeding in the southernmost Caribbean (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, and other islands off Venezuela; latitudes 12°–13°N; Voous 1965, Debrot *et al.* 2009, Escalans *et al.* 2009, van Halewijn 2009). Otherwise, the southernmost breeding locations for Common Terns in the

Americas are in South Carolina and Bermuda (32°–33°N). Although Common Terns formerly bred in the northern Gulf of Mexico (28°–30°N), they were apparently extirpated before 2000 (Arnold *et al.* 2020). All other published breeding records of Common Terns between 13°N and 32°N appear to be erroneous (Arnold *et al.* 2020); therefore, any future records should be carefully documented. Non-breeding Common Terns (mostly 1–2 yr old) are fairly numerous in the Caribbean during the summer, but they rarely visit breeding colonies of Roseate Terns and usually have plumage characteristics (white foreheads, white underparts, dark carpal bars, and largely black bills) that distinguish them from breeding adults of both species.

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Title Page Illustration

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*, left), on 28 July 2019 on Arashi Beach, Aruba (Macaulay Library ML170212981), and Roseate Tern (*S. dougallii*, right) on 13 July 2019 near Malmok Beach, Aruba (Macaulay Library ML168036761). Photographs by Michiel Oversteegen.

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