Big, Bright-billed Terns

Rich Stallcup

Three species of big terns, all with orange to red bills, occur in California. Their similarities combined with misleading illustrations in more than one field guide and an actual change in distribution over the last forty years have made their status and identification difficult.

They all have white bodies, pearly-gray mantles, black crowns or crests, and long bills. Their sizes range from that of Ring-billed Gull for Elegant to California Gull for Royal and almost Western Gull for Caspian but, being terns, the proportions are lower, sleeker and more streamlined. All other California terns are much smaller (Bonaparte's Gull size or less), have much black in the plumage, or have black bills.

Status and Distribution

Caspian Tern. Although a few winter coastally from Santa Barbara south, Caspians are generally present in California only from late March through early November. They are common and widespread in appropriate habitat during summer, are the only one of the three species normally expected in Northern California from late March through late June (when the first Elegant arrive), and are the only ones found inland.

Royal Tern. Until the 1950's, this species was a regular winter visitor to good numbers to coastal California as far north as San Francisco, but for the last 25 years Royal records from Morro Bay north are sparse. While the Royal Tern's winter range shifted south, the smaller Elegant Tern began to appear regularly north of Mexico in post-breeding flocks from late June through October. In 1959 they established a breeding colony at South San Diego Bay. Royals are still to be expected in coastal southern California year-round with lowest numbers in summer. Most birds found then are either at San Diego Bay or near the Channel Islands. In 1959 and 1980 single pairs nested within the newly established Elegant Tern colony at south San Diego Bay. The species is unrecorded inland in the state and is the only one of the three that occurs regularly in far offshore waters.

Elegant Tern. The stunning change in distribution in the 1950's brought the status of this species in northern California from nonexistent to common in late summer (late June through October). Numbers of birds and the northern extent of post-breeding incursions vary with the temperature of the ocean year to year and month to month. During the El Niño year of 1983, Elegant made their debut in Oregon, Washington, and even southern British Columbia, but usually Humboldt Bay, California is their northernmost port of call. Birds that breed in the San Diego colony arrive there from the south in early March. The colony contains about 200 pairs, and the species might be expected to pioneer farther north for nesting. Elegant Terns are locked to the coast, with interior records nonexistent and pelagic ones nearly so.

Identification

Caspian is the biggest and chunkiest. Its huge bill is the reddest of the three (immatures orange) and careful scrutiny of the bill's tip will always reveal some graviy markings. These dusky tips, while sometimes restricted only to the distal culmen, are entirely lacking in the Royal and Elegant whose bills are brightly colored throughout. The undersurface of the open wing shows darkness in all the primaries, especially the outer six, while Royal Tern's underwing appears whiter. Compared to Royal and Elegant, Caspians are hardly crested. Caspians have the heaviest bodies, broadest wings, and shortest tails of the three, and stand almost a head higher than Royals. The adults' call is a deep, coarse "Kraah" sometimes preceded by one or two "ka" notes. The pestering, immature begging noise is a shrill, whistled "wee-oo," dropping or rarely rising slightly on the last syllable.

Royals are intermediate in size and shape between the larger Caspians and smaller Elegant but more closely resemble the little cousin in all regards. They have narrower wings and longer bills than Caspians but broader wings and shorter tails than Elegant. Except for two or three outer primaries which are dusky, the open underwing appears nearly uniformly white. Royal's bill is more the shape of Elegant's than Caspian's—long, narrow, and dagger-like—and is orange throughout, lacking the dusky tip of Caspian's. Though Royals are bigger birds than Elegant, their bills are proportionately shorter and deeper at the base. In basic (winter) plumage, which is worn most of the year, the forecrown and face are white. For Pacific Royals, the eye is clearly in the white but a black streak begins behind the eye and includes the bushy nape feathers. This facial pattern is poorly presented in more than one field guide; the pattern for Royals is really more like what Elegant look like and vice versa. (See especially the illustrations in the Golden Guide.) Legs and feet are usually black but are bright orange on some birds. The adult's call is a staccato "arr reeep," rising on the second syllable. It is similar to Elegant's noise and very different from Caspian's.

Elegants are perfect terms. They are trim with long, narrow wings and tails and long, sharp, entirely orange bills (partly yellow in young birds). In these regards they are unlike Caspians but similar to Royals. When only one silent Royal/Elegant is seen (especially one with all black crown), and it does not exhibit the rosy glow on the underparts of many Elegants, specific identity is only a matter of bill and body proportions. For much of the year, however, these birds are in basic plumage, that is, with some degree of white forehead. Contrary to the pictures shown in one popular field guide, it is the eye of the Elegant which is included in the blackness extending forward from the black hindcrown, while the eye of the Royal stands alone on a white face. In flight, Elegants show more dark on the under-primaries than Royals but clearly less than Caspians. Elegant's legs and feet are usually black, but perhaps one in fifty birds has bright red. The adult's call is like that of Terns but is an even more abrupt "car-reeeek" or "ee-reeeek." Immatures follow parents to California from Mexico and bound them for food well into winter. Those begging calls vary but are often an undeniably series of sharp "pees" given while in hot pursuit of mom or dad.
Adult heads—basic plumage. Key features distinguishing Caspian (upper left), Royal (lower left), and Elegant (right) are the bill, face, and crown as described in text.

Underwings. Caspian (top) shows dark outer five or six primaries. Royal (middle) shows mostly whitish outer primaries with narrow, dusky tips. Elegant (bottom) shows dark leading edge to outermost primary and broad dusky tips to the five or six next primaries.