

## COMMON TERN

*Sterna hirundo*

**non-breeding visitor, vagrant**

*S. h. hirundo*

*S. h. longipennis*

In the Americas the Common Tern breeds from Canada SE to the Caribbean and winters primarily from Mexico and the Caribbean S to Argentina (AOU 1998). It also breeds across the Palearctic as far E as n. Siberia, wintering S to Africa, New Guinea, and Australia (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951c, Cramp and Simmons 1985, Higgins and Davies 1996). Vagrants have been recorded in the Pacific Basin from Clipperton I, the Cook Is, and Micronesia E to the Marshall Is (Pratt et al. 1987, 2010; Wiles 2005), as well as the Hawaiian Islands (Clapp et al. 1983), where many records are for over-wintering individuals. Because of the difficulty in separating Common from [Arctic](#) and other species of terns, we have considered several tentatively identified or undescribed individuals as unsubstantiated (see also Clapp et al. 1983).

All but three reports of Common Tern have been from the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands*, where a [minimum](#) of 35 substantiated individuals have been recorded, from *Kaua'i* (5, 1893-2016; e.g., BPBM 4424-4425, [HRBP](#) 5398-5399); *O'ahu* (19, 1961-2014; e.g., *E* 22:6; Clapp et al. 1983; USNM 596489; [HRBP](#) 0142-0143, 0158-0161, 0184-0187, 0550-0551, 5188, 5397, published *E* 43:97 and NAB 59:347); *Moloka'i* (1, 23 Mar-9 May 2007); *Maui* (5, 1979-2016; e.g., *E* 38:7; Clapp et al. 1983); and *Hawai'i* (5, 1901-2001; e.g., [HRBP](#) 1381, 5967-5968 [see [Whiskered Tern](#)]; BPBM 4223). A first-year individual that died at the Honolulu Zoo 10 Sep 1966 (BPBM 178466) may also have been found locally. Three together at Nu'upia Ponds, Mokapu Peninsula, O'ahu 24 Jan-18 Feb 1996 is the high count, and two together have been noted on three other occasions. Several records have involved long-staying birds originally arriving during their first fall, winter, or spring and remaining for the ensuing summer. These have included 1-2 individuals on O'ahu Apr 1981-Sep 1982 and one Jan 2012-May 2013, 1-2 on Maui Jan 1997-Jun 1998, and one on Kaua'i in 2008 ([HRBP](#) 5398-5399). Otherwise, most records involve over-wintering first-year birds and adults, first detected in Nov-Jan. There are three records of possible fall transients (29 Sep 1979, 8-10 Aug 1994, and 25 Jul-21 Aug 2008) and five records of possible spring transients (2-25 Apr 1961, 2-17 May 1985, 17 Apr-5 May 2000, 23 Mar-9 May 2007, two birds on 24 Apr 2011, and one 2 May 2012); first-spring individuals observed 7 Apr 1981 into 1982 and 24 Apr-9 Dec 1989 may also have dispersed to Hawaii from the S.

The first three specimen records from 1893 and 1901 (BPBM; see above) were of birds originally thought to be [Black-naped Terns](#) (Bryan 1901a, Henshaw 1902a), erroneous reports that were cited in the literature through at least 1967 (e.g., Bryan and Greenway 1944, Munro 1944, Peterson 1961:345) despite being correctly re-identified by R.A. Falla in 1962 (Clapp et al. 1983). The next substantiated record of Common Tern was of an individual present at Hawaii Kai, O'ahu, 2-25 April 1961, collected on the last date (specimen whereabouts unknown), that had been banded as a chick in Lake Huron, Michigan, in Jun 1960 (Ludwig 1961, Clapp et al. 1983). The description of a "White Tern" collected on one of the Southeastern Islands in 1786-1787 by Captain Nathaniel Portlock (1789) aboard the *King George*, includes a drawing (reprinted in Forbes 1992)

showing dark outer primaries and orange webs to the toes, indicating that it may have been a Common Tern.

Clapp et al. (1983) tentatively identified the early specimens from Hawaii as *S. h. longipennis* which breeds in Siberia, migrates through Micronesia (Pratt et al. 2010), and winters in Australasia, but re-examination of these (PP) and photographs, along with the record of a banded bird (see above), suggests that most if not all records from the Southeastern Islands pertain to the nominate subspecies *S. h. hirundo*, which occurs throughout Europe and N America and would be expected in the Southeastern Islands. In the *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands* there are only three substantiated records of Common Tern. One of them, a well-described adult on **Kure** 14-30 Jun 1985, shows plumage and bill characteristics of *S. h. longipennis*, the expected subspecies at this location during spring and early summer. Another tern casually identified as a Roseate Tern (*S. dougalli*) at French Frigate 20-30 Oct 1992 may also have been a *longipennis* Common Tern but the report lacks a description and we consider it unsubstantiated to species. A specimen collected on **Laysan** 9 Dec 2004 (BPBM 184969) is of nominate *hirundo* (PP examination), and one of two photographed on **French Frigate** 17 Sep-14 Oct 2007 ([HRBP 5930](#)) appears also to be of *hirundo*.

#### [Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

#### [Literature cited](#)

Citation: Pyle, R.L., and P. Pyle. 2017. The Birds of the Hawaiian Islands: Occurrence, History, Distribution, and Status. B.P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, HI, U.S.A. Version 2 (1 January 2017) <http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/birds/rlp-monograph/>