

Shades of grey: White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa* and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* near Porbandar, with notes on identification

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Photo 1 – presumed White-cheeked Tern – the bird depicted in the red square has dark ash-grey upperparts, lacking contrast with lesser-covert bar; tail feathers reaching wing tip; short legs. This bird looked significantly darker than surrounding Common Terns. Likely White-cheeked Tern but rump, tail or underwing pattern not observed. Note that one bird on the left is Common Tern which is much paler on the upperparts. 15 May 2022. Maulik Varu.

On 15 May 2022, I visited a coastal area near Porbandar, on Porbandar-Somnath Highway, with Punit Karia, Dr. Bhargav Raval and Swadeepsinh Jadeja. There, we saw a mixed flock of terns (*Sterna* sp.) consisting of Great-crested Tern (*Thalasseus bergii*), Lesser-crested Tern (*T. bengalensis*), Sandwich Tern (*T. sandvicensis*), Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) and Saunders's Tern (*Sternula saundersi*). We took many record photographs of this flock. We could see that some terns, which were similar in size to Common Terns, were looking much darker (photo 1). After watching a few photos on the computer at my home, I found 2-3 individuals looking different than nearby Common Terns; these birds were smaller-sized, with darker upperparts, and had a greyish wash on the entire underparts, showing white cheeks and longer tail projection; one - two birds were in non-breeding plumage while one bird was assuming breeding plumage. The flock then flew and I was able to take a video of this. I could see that some birds had greyish rump, greyish trailing edge to underwings, greyish lesser coverts and a pale band in the middle. I identified these birds as White-cheeked Terns (*Sterna repressa*) (photo 2) while some Common Terns were also present in this flock (photos 3-5).

I sent the photos to Prasad Ganpule and he informed that these individuals were likely to be White-cheeked Terns. He also informed that the identification of perched White-cheeked Terns is difficult as the grey rump and tail, and the underwing pattern, which are diagnostic, are not visible. There are previous sightings of White-cheeked Terns from Gujarat



Photo 2 – White-cheeked Tern – bird in red square – in flight, the dark trailing edge, dark lesser coverts and the white band in the middle is visible. The rump and tail are distinctly greyish. The grey rump and tail, along with the underwing pattern all point to White-cheeked Tern. 15 May 2022. Maulik Varu.

but many of these could not be conclusively identified as this species or were sight records not supported by photos. The true status of this species in Gujarat is not known and it is thought to be rare winter migrant here.

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IDENTIFICATION NOTE

[Previously, the White-cheeked Tern has been recorded a few times in Gujarat; from Porbandar (Parasharya & Mukherjee



Photo 3 – Breeding plumaged Common Tern. Dark trailing edge to primaries. Pale grey upperparts. Underparts with vineous-greyish wash. Short reddish bill. Note clean white tail and rump along with much paler upperparts than White-cheeked Tern. Presumed to be *ssp. tibetana*. 15 May 2022. Bhargav Raval.



Photo 4 – Common Tern – Note that the bird in the red square has greyish upperparts and white cheek-stripe is visible. But the rump and tail are white, contrasting with the mantle, similar to Common Tern. It is likely that camera exposure is making the bird look grey but this bird looks darker than the Lesser Crested Tern *T. bengalensis* in front of it. This image is from video grab and the true colours may not be evident but in the field, the bird looked greyish. 15 May 2022. Maulik Varu.

2001) and I had seen probable White-cheeked Terns twice with Maulik Varu, Ashvin Trivedi and Swadeepsinh Jadeja near Poshitra, Dwarka, on 24 October 2010 and 19 December 2010. While no photograph is available regarding the earlier sighting from Porbandar by Parasharya & Mukherjee (2001), the birds seen at Positra were photographed in flight from far but the photos were deemed to be too poor to confirm the identification beyond doubt. A recent record from Porbandar (Karia & Karia 2021), likely to be a White-cheeked Tern, was treated as unconfirmed since the rump and underwings could not be photographed though the plumage seemed too dark for Common Tern. I present here notes on identification of White-cheeked Tern and its separation from Common Tern.



PHOTO 5

Photo 5 – Common Tern – Note the bird in the red square has greyish underparts, but white tail and rump. The bill is short. Note that there is one more bird with faint grey wash to underparts below this individual. The grey trailing edge to the underwings is also visible. This image is from video grab and the true colours may not be evident but in the field, the bird looked greyish. 15 May 2022. Maulik Varu.

The identification of the White-cheeked Tern is difficult. It is very similar to Common Tern; the eastern subspecies *longipennis* of Common Tern is darker above and below than the nominate *hirundo*, approaching White-cheeked Tern in colour but the White-cheeked Tern is the darkest of medium-sized *Sterna* species (Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). Breeding White-cheeked Tern shows dull red bill with dark tip or wholly dark upper mandible – dark bill tip is usually larger than in Common Tern but can be similar to *longipennis* Common Tern. The bill is long and evenly slender, with a drooping tip in White-cheeked Tern while Common Tern has a relatively shorter bill than White-cheeked Tern (van Duivendijk 2011). The plumage is darker grey above, being ash-grey to sooty-grey, with grey rump and tail almost concolorous with back (Common Tern always shows white rump and tail in breeding plumage) – but note that White-cheeked Tern can show rather conspicuous white sides to the rump (Malling Olsen & Shirihai 1997). The tail feathers lack inner white webs seen in Common Tern and hence, tail looks uniformly grey (Grimmett et al. 2011). The underparts are darker grey in breeding plumage, and a white cheek-stripe is visible – recalling a long-billed and long-tailed Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*). The dark underparts can often have a vineous tinge.

In non-breeding plumage, it is extremely similar to Common Tern and differs in being darker with all grey upperparts, with broader carpal bar not contrasting much with upperparts. The underparts are white, and black cap is slightly more extensive towards the forehead than in Common Tern while some White-cheeked Terns in winter show completely dark forehead (van

...White-cheeked Tern

Duivendijk 2011). In flight in all adult plumages, a pale central band is visible on underwing, contrasting with grey lesser coverts and almost complete dark trailing edge of wing. The flight is powerful, with faster and deeper wingbeats than Common Tern, and the body clearly moves up and down with the wing beats (Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). It is important to note that the rump has white sides in White-cheeked Tern, which is obvious when seen side-ways on (Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) have stated that Common Tern has a "greyer rump (in winter plumage only) than Arctic" Tern (*S. paradisaea*). However, the greyish rump in Common Tern in non-breeding is not mentioned in other reference texts. But if present in a few individuals in the winter, then this can cause further confusion in identification and separation of White-cheeked Tern from Common Tern. The tail streamers reach till wing tip or slightly beyond in White-cheeked Tern, which is also seen in Common Terns of eastern populations (van Duivendijk 2011). The length of the tail streamers is thus not very useful in identification. Malling Olsen & Shirihai (1997) have covered the field identification of White-cheeked Tern, with notes on breeding, non-breeding, first-winter/summer and second-summer plumages and can be referred to for further details; the White-cheeked Tern can be confused with Whiskered Tern, Saunders's Tern (*Sternula saundersi*) and Little Tern (*S. albifrons*) and the details of separation of White-cheeked Tern from these species is discussed by these authors and is not covered here.

Three subspecies of Common Tern are usually recognized; *S. h. hirundo*, *S. h. tibetana* and *S. h. longipennis* – a fourth subspecies, *S. h. minussensis* is recognized in several prominent sources but there is confusion about this taxon's diagnosable characters and breeding distribution (Arnold et al. 2020). Generally, it is described as intermediate between *S. h. hirundo* and *S. h. longipennis*, with the plumage coloration of the former and the bare part coloration more similar to the latter or variably intermediate. *S. h. minussensis* is usually treated as a junior synonym of *S. h. hirundo*, but such a treatment may be problematic given that the type locality of *S. h. minussensis* may lie within the breeding range ascribed to *S. h. tibetana*. Thus, following Arnold et al. (2020), three subspecies of Common Tern are recognized, with *S. h. minussensis* herein treated as a junior synonym of *S. h. hirundo*.

The subspecies *tibetana* is said to occur regionally while *longipennis* is possible or definite in our region (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Regionally occurring *tibetana* is said to be darker dorsally and ventrally (underparts have a vineous wash) than nominate *hirundo* while *longipennis* has a somewhat paler mantle than *tibetana* and darker bill (Arnold et al. 2020); the bill is shorter in *tibetana* than *hirundo*. Thus, regionally occurring *tibetana* can be somewhat darkish-grey in breeding plumage but has a shorter bill. In fresh plumage in spring, *tibetana* is slightly darker on the underparts and distinctly darker on the mantle than *longipennis*; light conditions also affect the perception of shades of grey (Kennerly 1995). In the photo given in Kennerly (1995), the upperparts look very dark

Table 1: Bill measurements in White-cheeked Terns and Common Terns

		Bill	Bill depth at gonys	Bill depth at rear edge of nostrils
Common Tern ssp. <i>hirundo</i>	ad ♂	32.2-40.3 (36.8) n=201	5.6-8.0 (7.0) n=198	7.6-10.0 (8.2) n=201
	ad ♀	32.1-39.6 (35.7) n=103	5.4-7.7 (6.7) n=110	7.2-9.5 (8.3) n=111
	ad	32.1-40.3 (n=312)		
	1 st summer	32.8-37.4 (35.7) n=17	6.0-7.3 (6.7) n=17	7.3-8.8 (8.0) n=17
Common Tern Ssp. <i>longipennis</i>	ad ♂	31.8-39.9 (35.2) n=55		
	ad ♀	31.9-37.4 (33.5) n=37		
	ad	31.9-39.9 (n=76)		
Common Tern Ssp. <i>tibetana</i>	ad ♂	30.4-36.7 (33.8) n=41		
	ad ♀	29.9-35.2 (32.2) n=42		
White-cheeked Tern	ad ♂	34.4-38.0 (35.9) n=23 36-39 (37.4) n=4 (in Persian Gulf)	5.9-7.0 (6.4) n=23	6.9-8.0 (7.6) n=23
	ad ♀	33.7-36.7 (35.1) n= 22 34-37 (32.2) n=5 (in Persian Gulf)	5.6-7.0 (6.3) n=22	6.7-8.0 (7.3) n=22
	ad	33.7-38.0 (n=45)		
	juv/1 st winter	28.6-34.1 (32.2) n=5	5.5-6.6 (6.2) n=5	6.1-7.7 (7.2) n=5

but the photo is from a print / negative, not from a digital camera, and looks overexposed. Thus, judging colours in this photo is difficult. It is important to note that all three subspecies of Common Terns can occur here in India, though on the western coast, especially in Gujarat, the occurrence of ssp. *tibetana* and *hirundo* is more likely.

While the White-cheeked Tern is said to have a long and evenly slender bill, often drooping at the tip, this is not always apparent in the field and based on observations of dark plumaged birds in the field at Porbandar, there is some variation in bill length

and depth. However, since photos of rump and tail of all dark plumaged birds seen at Porbandar were not obtained, the identification of many such darker birds remained inconclusive. But, in birds with grey rump and tail clearly seen here, there was some variation in this feature. Based on measurements in Malling Olsen & Larsson (1995), this difference in bill length and depth seems to be slight and might not be of much use in the field. A Table giving measurements of bills in White-cheeked Terns and Common Terns, based on Malling Olsen & Larsson (1995) and Malling Olsen & Shirihai (1997), is given here.

Table 2: Photos of Common Terns and White-cheeked Terns posted on eBird

Photographs posted on eBird	Remarks
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/357424371 Location: UK	Breeding plumaged <u>Common Tern</u> . Note pale grey mantle and almost whitish underparts with only faint vineous tinge. White tail and rump. All red, short bill – ssp. <i>hirundo</i>
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/169247651 Location: Ladakh, India	Breeding plumaged <u>Common Tern</u> . Note vineous-grey wash to underparts. A whitish cheek-stripe is apparent. White rump and underwing pattern is typical of Common Tern and upperparts are pale grey. Note very short bill. Presumed ssp. <i>tibetana</i>
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/458392981 Location: Tamil Nadu, India	<u>Common Tern</u> in almost full breeding plumage. Note the pale grey upperparts. Bill is red at base. Few whitish spots are present on forehead. Note white tail. Presumed ssp. <i>tibetana</i> .
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/229626281 Location: eastern China	Breeding plumaged <u>Common Tern</u> . Ssp. <i>longipennis</i> . Greyish wash on underparts, all black short bill. Note that it shows pale greyish trailing edges to secondaries, somewhat similar to White-cheeked Tern but lesser-coverts white
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/370160191 Location: eastern China	Breeding plumaged <u>Common Tern</u> . Ssp. <i>longipennis</i> . Short bill; dark greyish underparts and shows white cheek stripe. Greyish trailing edges to secondaries but lesser coverts white. Note quite dark underparts
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/214126781 Location: eastern Russia	Breeding plumaged <u>Common Tern</u> . Ssp. <i>longipennis</i> . Pale grey wash to underparts and shows hint of cheek stripe. Underwing pattern typical of Common Tern
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/303891911 Location: Australia	Non-breeding <u>Common Tern</u> – note the pale greyish wash in centre of rump. Upperparts pale grey, much paler than White-cheeked Tern and rump is not uniformly grey but rather shows only some grey in the centre. Ssp. <i>longipennis</i>
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/457439721 Location: UAE	Breeding plumaged <u>White-cheeked Tern</u> . Note concolorous ash-grey upperparts and underparts. White cheek-stripe is prominent. Red bill with dark tip
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/344800371 Location: UAE	Breeding plumaged <u>White-cheeked Tern</u> . Note ash-grey underparts, typical wing pattern with grey lesser coverts and grey trailing edge to wing with contrasting pale band in the centre. Well defined white cheek stripe; red bill with dark tip
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/341419431 Location: UAE	<u>White-cheeked Terns</u> – one bird in breeding and others in non-breeding. Note the very dark upperparts and long, thin slightly down curved bill. Breeding plumaged bird shows well defined cheek-stripe. Upperparts are ash-grey
https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/155621631 Location: UAE	<u>White-cheeked Terns</u> – one bird shows dark bill and is not in full breeding. Note the overall ash-grey upperparts and long thin bills. Also note white-cheek stripe in bird assuming breeding plumage is not well defined. Underparts in breeding plumaged birds are pale greyish

...White-cheeked Tern

As can be seen from the Table 1, there is much overlap in bill measurements. But, in general, Common Tern of ssp. *tibetana* has a shorter bill when compared with the White-cheek Tern. The long, slender drooping bill, if present, is strongly indicative of White-cheeked Tern and when a combination of plumage features are checked, then identification is easier.

I searched for photos of Common Terns from India (presumably of ssp. *tibetana*) and compared them with White-cheeked Terns. I also searched for photographs of breeding plumaged *longipennis* Common Tern. A few photos of Common Terns and White-cheeked Terns, sourced from eBird, are given with remarks in Table 2.

As can be seen from the photos referenced in the Table 2, Common Terns often show a white cheek-stripe, which is somewhat similar to the cheek-stripe in White-cheeked Tern. Further, as can be seen in the photos, Common Terns can show greyish trailing edge to secondaries. When assuming breeding plumage, the cheek-stripe in White-cheeked Tern is not well defined. It can be seen that structurally, White-cheeked Tern generally looks shorter legged and longer billed than Common Tern. The plumage is darker ash-grey/sooty-grey, especially on the upperparts, in White-cheeked Tern though some Common Terns do look somewhat dark on the mantle. But, in general, White-cheeked Tern is darker than Common Tern, and in non-breeding plumage, the upperparts of Common Tern are paler, contrasting strongly with the dark carpal bar while in White-cheeked Tern, the upperparts do not show strong contrast with the carpal bar and the rump and tail are darker grey. In some Common Terns in breeding plumage, the underparts do look quite dark, similar to White-cheeked Tern, but other features like shorter bill, white tail/rump help in separating it from White-cheeked Tern. I have frequently seen Common Terns in Gujarat in non-breeding plumage and they show pale upperparts contrasting with dark carpal bar; upperparts are not dark and identification is fairly easy. The greyish trailing edge to the underwings and the white cheek-stripe are features that can be shown by the Common Tern is not mentioned in the reference texts and needs further study. A photo of *longipennis* Common Tern given on page 158 in Malling Olsen & Shirihi (1997) shows a bird with a grey trailing edge to secondaries and it is stated that in worn autumn birds, the secondaries can look darker in Common Terns but are never as conspicuous as in White-cheeked Tern. Hence, the greyish trailing edge to the secondaries can be a feature of Common Tern.

Overall, the pattern of the underwings and the grey tail and rump, which are almost as dark as the back, are the most



Photo 6 – White-cheeked Tern. Note very dark ash-grey upperparts. The bill is very long and drooping. This bird is in moult. The long drooping bill and the dark grey mantle fit White-cheeked Tern. Also note that the black crown and nape resembles a *Thalasseus* species, looking somewhat shaggy on the nape, unlike a Common Tern. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.



Photo 7 - White-cheeked Tern. This bird was preening and the grey rump and tail, concolorous with the upperparts is clearly seen. This individual is also in moult. Note that the Common Tern in front looks much paler on the mantle with distinct contrast between the upperparts and carpal bar. This photo is instructive as it provides a direct comparison between the White-cheeked Tern and Common Tern. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.

important characteristics in distinguishing the White-cheeked Tern from Common Tern and unless these features are observed well, identification is difficult though some very dark ash-grey/sooty-grey plumaged birds can be identified as White-cheeked Terns as plumage in Common Terns is not that dark in non-breeding plumage (pers. observation). While *tibetana* Common Terns can be dark on the mantle, in direct comparison with White-cheeked Terns at Porbandar, the mantle looked much paler in Common Terns. It is pertinent to note that sometimes, the upperparts of breeding plumaged White-cheeked Terns look paler than the underparts in sharp sunlight (Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). In the photos given here from Porbandar (Photos 6-13), most of the features of White-cheeked Terns are seen and since there were many Common Terns present in the



Photo 8 - White-cheeked Terns. The bird on the right shows dark ash-grey upperparts, long bill and short legs. The preening bird on the left showed grey rump and tail, and had dark upperparts with long bill and short legs. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.



Photo 9 – White-cheeked Tern. The bird preening its wings had a greyish rump and tail, with dark greyish upperparts. The paler bird on the left (at the back) is a non-breeding Common Tern. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.

flock, direct comparison between both species was possible. As can be seen in the photos, the White-cheeked Tern is darker, with shorter legs and longer bill. In the field, the White-cheeked Tern is smaller than the Common Tern. Also compare White-cheeked Terns from Porbandar with this photo given in Table 2 (ML 341419431) and note that upperpart colour is similar to birds seen in Porbandar. There are very good photos of Common Terns from Central Asia (Kazakhstan) posted on the following website, at: <https://www.birds.kz/v2taxbest.php?s=270&l=en>. Photographs of many Common Terns in

breeding plumages are posted on this website. But, none of the birds approach White-cheeked Tern in mantle colour – the darkest birds are paler than White-cheeked Terns based on these photos. These birds are likely to be *hirundo/tibetana*. However, appreciating many of the features of White-cheeked Terns in the field is difficult and photos, from all angles, should be taken to confirm the identification. It is important that due caution be taken when identifying perched birds since the rump and underwing pattern is not usually visible when the bird is perched and these can be seen only in flight or when preening.



Photo 10 – White-cheeked Tern – Same birds as in photo 9. Note that the bill is long and this individual was smaller than the Common Terns seen at the back. The bird at the back, towards the right, is also likely to be a White-cheeked Tern, with ash-grey upperparts and underparts. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.



Photo 11 –White-cheeked Tern assuming breeding plumage. Note ash-grey upperparts and greyish underparts. The bill is slim and long, with dark upper mandible and broad dark tip to lower mandible. Red legs. The white cheek-stripe is not well defined yet. Though the rump and tail were not seen in this bird, it is too dark for Common Tern and likely to be White-cheeked Tern. Note that the bird at the back is paler, with a stronger short bill, matching Common Tern. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.

Based on observations in the field, an interesting question is whether the 'Kodak Grey Scale' can be used in separating White-cheeked Tern from Common Tern. A study of museum specimens should be conducted using the Kodak Grey Scale and the values compared with values for Common Terns. If there are

consistent differences, then this can be applied in separating these two species. But, it is not known how dark the darkest Common Terns are. The difference between the darkest Common Terns and the palest White-cheeked Terns should be measured; this can then be used in assessing if the Kodak Grey



Photo 12 – White-cheeked Tern. Note that the bird preening on the right (with the raised tail) has a grey tail and rump. The upperparts are ash-grey and the carpal bar contrasts with the mantle. This individual had somewhat paler plumage than the other White-cheeked Terns present but rump and tail were distinctly greyish. Underwing pattern not noted. But based on the grey tail, fits White-cheeked Tern. 17 June 2022. Konark Karia.



Photo 13 – White-cheeked Tern – The bird in the front has dark grey upperparts. It is in worn plumage, and some new pale ash-grey feathers are visible on the mantle. Dark grey tail feathers are visible but rump looks paler grey. The outer tail feathers are worn. The legs are short and the bill is long and drooping at the tip. All these features, especially the dark grey tail, fit White-cheeked Tern. Konark Karia. 24 May 2022.

Scale is a useful tool in identification of these taxa. Malling Olsen & Larsson (1995) stated that in White-cheeked Terns “the grey underparts may have an element of white or be paler grey; the palest birds are close to the darkest Common Terns (especially of race *longipennis*)”. While underpart colour may be similar, the

mantle colour is more ash-grey/sooty-grey in White-cheeked Tern and the difference could be consistent so that the grey scale values can be useful. The Kodak Grey Scale is widely used in identification of ‘large white-headed gulls’ (*Larus* species) and can probably be used in this case. Though, it should be noted



Photo 14 – Common Tern – A typical Common Tern in non-breeding plumage. Note the pale grey upperparts with dark carpal bar. Faint grey wash on belly is apparent. The bill is short, tail streamers reach till wings tip and rump is white. Near Dwarka, Gujarat. Prasad Ganpule. 14 October 2017.



PHOTO 15

Photo 15 – Common Terns – This flock of Common Terns was resting. Note the much paler upperparts and stronger, shorter bill. Carpal bar is distinct and contrasts with the upperparts in two birds. The bird on the extreme right (sitting down) is acquiring breeding plumage and looks pale silvery-grey, with red base to bill. Porbandar. Gaurang Bagda. 22 May 2022.

that using grey scale values is a somewhat theoretical exercise and it is likely to be only indicative; using it in the field requires experience and may not always be possible.

Based on our observations in the field in Gujarat, we found that Common Terns in non-breeding plumage did not have dark upperparts/mantle like White-cheeked Terns (photo 14 & 15). The pale grey rump in non-breeding Common Terns mentioned by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) is not apparent and in the individuals I have seen in Gujarat (>100), the rump and tail looked white. However, I have not seen many Common Terns in

breeding plumage here in Gujarat and lack the data to compare Common Terns and White-cheeked Terns in breeding plumages / in the summer months. In the birds seen at Porbandar, a few individuals with pale grey upperparts, shorter bill and greyish underparts showed distinctly whitish rump and tail, which could be identified as Common Terns. In this flock, few individuals had a grey rump and tail, with dark trailing edge to underwings, grey-lesser coverts and a white band in the middle, which were identified as White-cheeked Terns. Some birds remained unidentified as rump/tail and underwings could not be photographed (photo 16). Hence, not all similar-sized, greyish-



Photo 16 – White-cheeked Tern? – The dark individual in the middle is somewhat of a mystery. It looks distinctly darker than the Common Terns in front and behind it. But, note that the upperparts are not quite darker ash-grey. The bill looks quite strong at the base but is drooping at the tip and is long (it is not slender). The white cheek-stripe is apparent and the underparts, especially near the belly, look quite dark. It is assuming breeding plumage. But is it a White-cheeked Tern? Without photos showing the rump, tail and underwings, identification is best left open though it is likely to be a White-cheeked Tern. Konark Karia. 24 May 2022.

looking birds in flocks of Common Terns should be identified as White-cheeked Terns! And the extent of grey in Common Terns needs more investigation. Further, the camera settings – like exposure, ambient light, background, colour settings are important when judging plumage in photos.

The White-cheeked Tern is a breeding visitor to the Vengurla Rocks, near Malvan, off the Maharashtra coast, and a passage migrant off Pakistan coast in March-June and October-December; it is said to be entirely coastal and pelagic in the non-breeding season (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). For India, there are only a few confirmed records (with photographs) posted on 'eBird', and majority of the sightings are during pelagic trips off the west coast. In May-end and June 2022, Konark Karia, young birder from Porbandar, visited the same location near Porbandar a few times and got good photographs of birds showing typical features of White-cheeked Terns. He informed (pers. comm.) that these terns were seen till the end of June in this area and were well documented by him. Many of the photos taken by him show very dark plumaged individuals, which can be identified as White-cheeked Terns as these birds were too dark for Common Tern, structurally looked shorter

legged and longer billed and most importantly, showed dark grey rump and tail. These birds were seen intermittently in this area for almost one month and were photographed.

The status of the White-cheeked Tern in Gujarat was given as 'uncommon winter visitor' (Ganpule 2016). Due to a paucity of records and difficulty in identification, its true status is difficult to ascertain. However, based on the recent confirmed sightings in May-June near Porbandar over the past two years, this species is likely to be more common during the summer passage migration season off the Gujarat coast when it returns to breed on the Vengurla Rocks and approaches near to the coast/is seen in coastal areas. The earlier sighting by Parasharya & Mukherjee (2001) from Porbandar was also in June. Hence, it is likely that in May-June, a few individuals come on the coasts. It could be a rare winter migrant here but with very few confirmed sightings, this is difficult to assess; if it is mainly pelagic in the non-breeding season, then it could be quite rare on the coasts in the winter. It has been recorded off-shore near Veraval recently (in October 2018) during a pelagic trip (Mansata 2018) but there are no recent photographic records near the coast in the winter. It could be occurring in coastal Kachchh (in the extreme western

Table 3: Summary of features of White-cheeked Tern and Common Tern in breeding and non-breeding plumages

	Breeding		Non-breeding		Remarks
	White-cheeked Tern	Common Tern	White-cheeked Tern	Common Tern	
Size and structure	Shorter-legged and smaller than Common Tern	Longer-legged and bigger than White-cheeked Tern	Shorter-legged and smaller than Common Tern	Longer-legged and bigger than White-cheeked Tern	White-cheeked Tern is slightly smaller than Common Tern
Bill size and shape	Long, slender and drooping	Shorter, straight and deeper-based	Long, slender and drooping	Shorter, straight and deeper-based	Long, slender and drooping bill is strongly indicative of White-cheeked Tern
Bill colour	Dull red with dark tip or wholly dark upper mandible	Reddish or bright red bill with dark tip*	Black	Black	* <i>ssp. longipennis</i> shows all black bill in breeding
Head Pattern	Black cap with prominent white cheek- stripe	Black cap and may show whitish cheek- stripe	Black on head more extensive on forehead – can show dark forehead in winter	Black on head mainly on crown and nape – white forehead and forecrown	
Upperparts	Dark ash-grey or sooty-grey, not contrasting much with broad carpal bar	Pale grey or darkish grey contrasting with thinner carpal bar	Ash-grey or sooty grey, not contrasting much with broad carpal bar	White or pale grey with contrasting dark carpal bar	Dark sooty-grey or ash-grey upperparts are indicative of White-cheeked Tern
Rump and tail	Grey and concolorous with dark greyish mantle	White and contrasting with greyish mantle	Grey and concolorous with mantle	White and similar in colour to mantle	Grey rump and tail are diagnostic for White-cheeked Tern
Underparts	Dark greyish, similar to upperparts and can show vineous wash	Paler or slightly dark greyish, paler than upperparts – shows vineous wash	White and contrasting much with dark greyish upperparts	White, similar to upperparts	
Tail streamers	Reaching tail tip or extending slightly beyond tail tip	Usually do not extend beyond tail tip*	Reaching tail tip or extending slightly beyond tail tip	Usually do not extend beyond tail tip	* <i>ssp. longipennis</i> may show tail streamers beyond wing tip
Underwing pattern	Grey-lesser coverts and dark grey trailing edge with white band in middle	White lesser coverts and middle band but can show greyish trailing edge to wing	Grey-lesser coverts and dark grey trailing edge with white band in middle	White underwing but with dark trailing edge mainly to primaries	Underwing pattern of grey lesser coverts, dark grey trailing edge and white band in middle is diagnostic of White-cheeked Tern

part) in May-June (since it is closer to Pakistan where it is common during this period) but needs to be looked out for. Further sightings will help in understanding its status in Gujarat.

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