

A COMMON X ROSEATE TERN PAIRING ON LONG ISLAND

On 29 May 2009, I observed a male Common Tern courting, feeding, and copulating with a female Roseate Tern at Democrat Pt., Suffolk County, Long Island, NY. They copulated on at least four separate occasions 1641-1805 EDT, including three instances that were photographed (1643, 1708, and 1752 EDT), and they displayed to each other even when other individual Common and Roseate Terns approached them. The male of the interspecific pair, who was individually recognizable by virtue of his somewhat smudgy bill and details of his wingtip pattern, flew off several times and returned at least once with a fish, which he fed to the Roseate.

Such pairings are quite rare, and some documented examples have been shown to involve individuals that were themselves hybrids (Helen Hays pers. comm.; Ian Nisbet, pers. comm.). In this case, the species identities of the birds involved were rigorously assessed (see Fig. G, p. 266). The female Roseate appeared absolutely typical of the species in terms of plumage, structure, soft parts coloration, and voice, and furthermore appeared petite even for Roseate Tern, which is visibly slighter than Common Tern in terms of overall bulk, especially under direct comparison. I considered the possibility of the male being a hybrid Common x Roseate himself, but his body size (large); bill structure (deep dorso-ventrally, not particularly long, and with a noticeably curved culmen); underparts color (deeply and extensively gray); upperparts color (slightly darker than that of Roseate Tern, contrasting markedly with white rump); tail streamers (not very long and showing black outer webs); wingtips (relatively long hands with dark "hooks" on the primary tips) all seemed fine for

Common Tern. I don't remember hearing him call. The extra dark markings on his bill and the appearance of his retained outer primaries (fresher-looking than in most adult Commons at this date) are features I regularly see on "second-summer type" Commons, which typically also show white on the forehead and dusky lesser secondary coverts in combination with their smudgy bills and more uniform-looking wingtips. Ian Nisbet (pers. comm.) agreed that this bird was a Common Tern and suggested that it might have been three years old.

Neither species actually nests at Democrat Pt., nor have they nested there in my experience, from 1996 to present. This site is, however, directly across the Fire Island Inlet from the site of the great Cedar Beach tern colony, which formerly hosted large numbers of breeding Common and Roseate Terns, as well as Black Skimmers. This colony was abandoned around 1996, but smaller numbers of Common Terns have continued breeding nearby on salt marsh islands. Democrat Pt. remains a convenient place to observe pre-breeding staging and mid-summer loafing by many species of terns, including some unusual species. Roseate Terns have returned to Demo every year since I began working the site in 1996, nourishing hopes that a few pairs have continued breeding in the area, probably on the salt marsh islands. This suspicion has been confirmed in recent summers by Brian Zitani's discovery of a few pairs breeding on a marsh island near Gilgo (KB 58: 401).

Whereas a large proportion of the Roseate Terns I see on eastern Long Island are banded, most of those at Democrat Pt. are not. For instance, of 21 Roseates present there on 16 May this year, only three were banded—a ratio that would be difficult to reproduce anywhere near the intensively studied megacolonies at Great Gull Island in eastern LI Sound and Bird Island in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts. This pattern also suggests that undetected breeding has continued in the area since the demise of the Cedar Beach colony. In a similar vein, careful attention to terns around Fire Island Inlet has also yielded patterns of spring records for Forster's and Gull-billed Terns that are strongly suggestive of breeding by these species as well on the nearby marsh islands of Great South Bay.

S. S. Mitra, Biology Department, College of Staten Island, 2800 Victory Blvd, Staten Island, NY 10314.
mitra@mail.csi.cuny.edu

