

ELEGANT TERN (*THALASSEUS ELEGANS*) ON THE NIAGARA RIVER—SECOND RECORD FOR NEW YORK STATE AND FIRST FOR THE GREAT LAKES

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At 12:50 p.m. on 20 November 2013, Victoria (Vicki) Rothman of Youngstown, New York was bird-watching along the Niagara River at Beaver Island State Park at the south end of Grand Island, Erie County. Weather conditions at the time were sunny with light east winds and temperatures around 40°F. While observing a flock of gulls sitting in the rocky shallows just offshore, she discovered a medium-sized tern with a bright orange bill that she identified as either an Elegant Tern (*Thalasseus elegans*) or Royal Tern (*T. maximus*). Knowing the rarity of either species, she called via cell phone to notify me of the bird. After describing field marks over the phone, it was evident that certain features, notably the small size and thin bill, suggested that it was an Elegant rather than Royal Tern, despite the fact that the latter species is arguably the more likely of the two to occur in the region.

Within a half hour, I joined Vicki at the park, and we found the tern standing on a small rock next to several Bonaparte's Gulls (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). Having seen both Elegant and Royal Terns on a regular basis along the coast of California, I was amazed to see that it did indeed appear to be an Elegant Tern, being roughly the size of the Bonaparte's Gulls, with a thin, bright orange bill, long shaggy crest, and extensive black feathering across the face. During the first few minutes of observation, I obtained several record photographs before it took flight with Bonaparte's Gulls. After closely reviewing the photos on the camera screen, we concluded that features of the bird were consistent with an immature Elegant Tern, and proceeded to notify others about the sighting. Unfortunately by the time several people arrived on site, it was no longer present, and was not seen again until an hour and a half later when it briefly flew over the shallows and then continued to fly out of sight over the Niagara River.

The next morning on 21 November, the Elegant Tern was not observed at Beaver Island State Park on Grand Island despite searching by birders. Later that morning, while checking other areas of the upper Niagara River, Willie D'Anna ran into Dennis and Susan Gralak at Rich Marine in the Black Rock district of Buffalo. Here they showed him photographs on their camera screen of what they thought might have been the Elegant Tern. They had taken the photos the previous day, 20 November, at 2:45 p.m. from nearby Squaw Island Park as the bird flew over the adjacent Black Rock Canal. D'Anna confirmed that the photos were of the Elegant Tern, and this meant that on the afternoon of the 20th when the bird was not being seen at Beaver Island State Park, it had flown

approximately two miles southeast to Squaw Island Park in Buffalo before making a brief appearance back at Beaver Island.

Around 10:15 a.m. after moving to Squaw Island Park, D'Anna re-found the Elegant Tern. He and others watched as it stood with several dozen Bonaparte's Gulls and up to seven Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) near the end of the concrete pier located at the far north end of the island. Here the tern allowed for a very close and detailed study, both perched and in flight as it foraged loosely with the thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls present. Observers at Squaw Island also noted that the tern would consistently forage for several minutes at a time in the calmer waters of the Black Rock Canal, and usually close to the canal locks where it was seen plunge diving and successfully catching and consuming baitfish, apparently Emerald Shiners (*Notropis atherinoides*). On several occasions it was observed surfacing with up to four baitfish at once, and then proceeding to fly up, drop the fish, and re-catch one in mid-air before swallowing it.

The Elegant Tern was observed in the vicinity of the concrete pier at Squaw Island Park until 23 November, and during this time was seen by hundreds of people from across New York and the province of Ontario. Over the course of its stay at Squaw Island, many took close photographs, including several of the bird perched and in flight (Figures 1-4).

On the evening of 23 November, a cold front moved through the Western New York region, bringing strong northwest winds, occasional snow showers, and overnight temperatures as low as 15° F (Thomas 2013). On the morning of 24 November, the Elegant Tern was not found at Squaw Island Park, while nearly all of the Bonaparte's Gulls and over half of the lingering Common Terns from the preceding days had also left the area. The tern was not seen again until 2:30 p.m. that afternoon when it was discovered by Ontario birders Dave Fidler and Peter Middleton in Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, approximately one mile south of Squaw Island Park. Here it was observed standing with Ring-billed Gulls on a rocky outcrop along the shoreline and briefly in flight. After disappearing for a short time, it reappeared back on the rocks at 3:35 p.m. Around 4:00 p.m., the last observation of the bird was made as birders in Fort Erie watched the tern take flight out over the Niagara River.

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The Elegant Tern appeared about the same size as nearby Bonaparte's Gulls and with slightly paler gray upperparts. The underparts were all white, while the primaries appeared blackish-gray, contrasting with the pale gray wings and mantle. The forehead was white and a small area of thick black streaking was present on the forehead, which then merged into a solid black rear crown and face patch that completely encompassed the dark eyes. In relaxed position, a fairly long, shaggy black crest drooped beyond the rear crown and onto the white nape. The bill was bright orange at the base, gradually becoming paler yellow-orange towards the tip; it was fairly thin and spike-like with a very slight downcurve throughout its length. Viewing the bill closely, two small blackish

markings extended out towards the nares at the base of the upper mandible. The short legs and feet were blackish.

In flight, the wings appeared long and pointed, and the tail was slightly notched. The upperwings were pale gray with a weak grayish carpal bar at the leading edges of the wings. The outer primaries and coverts were blackish-gray, contrasting with pale gray inner primaries. At certain angles, it was apparent that the outermost primary (primary 10) on the right wing was broken off about halfway down the feather shaft. Blackish-gray secondaries with narrow white tips formed a dark secondary bar along the trailing edges of the wings. The white central tail feathers, rump, and uppertail coverts contrasted with the pale gray mantle, while the outer tail feathers were dusky gray with blackish-gray tips that appeared quite worn. Upon closer scrutiny, some of these feathers showed limited whitish tips and edges. The underwings appeared whitish with a broad blackish trailing edge at the wing-tips.

Referencing Olsen and Larsson (1995), Pyle (2008), and Shoch and Howell (2013), the Elegant Tern was aged as a first-winter at approximately six to eight months of age based on its mix of juvenile and first-basic (formative) plumage. The blackish-gray primaries, secondaries, and outer rectrices indicate juvenile feathers, while the pale gray mantle and inner primaries indicate new first-basic feathers molted during the late summer and early fall months.

Features that readily separated the bird from first-winter Royal Tern were the much smaller body size, thinner spike-like bill, long shaggy crest, and extensive black face patch completely encompassing the eyes (Olsen and Larsson 1995, Sibley 2000).

The Mediterranean race of Lesser Crested Tern (*T. bengalensis emigrata*) of the northern and western African coasts is similar to Elegant Tern in size, plumage, and bare parts coloration, and although there are no records from North America, the species occurs rarely in Europe (A.O.U. 1998; Shoch and Howell 2013). Lesser Crested Tern has a blunter, thicker bill; slightly darker gray upperparts with a gray rump and central tail; and in immature and non-breeding plumages, shows a prominent white crescent below and behind the eye. In first-winter plumage, they show uniform dark tips to the outer three rectrices, while in Elegant Tern the tips to rectrix four and five are white (Olsen and Larsson 1995). Although there was noticeable wear on the outer tail feathers, the remnants of these whitish tips are visible in close photographs of the spread tail.

The South American subspecies of Sandwich Tern (*T. sandvicensis eurygnatha*) known as ‘Cayenne’ Tern is very similar to Elegant Tern in size, shape, structure, and plumage. Compared to Elegant Tern, first-winter ‘Cayenne’ Tern differs most notably in having a dull yellow bill often with variable dark markings, a noticeable white crescent below and behind the eye, a shorter crest, and finer black streaking across the crown (Olsen and Larsson 1995, Shoch and Howell 2013).

Regarding hybrid *Thalasseus* terns, Shoch and Howell (2013) state that that it may not be possible to fully discount hybrid origin in the identification of any orange-billed *Thalasseus* tern. A small number of hybrid pairings between Elegant and Sandwich Terns, Lesser Crested and Sandwich Terns, and

(indeterminate) orange-billed *Thalasseus* terns and Sandwich Terns have been documented at tern colonies in North America and Europe over the last 25 years. Currently, no descriptions of known hybrid adults exist, and in the case of two known Lesser Crested x Sandwich Tern juveniles banded in the United Kingdom and observed in their first fall, both individuals exhibited at least one character shown by each parent species (Steele and McGuigan 1989, Jiguet 1997). This would seem to support the assumption that hybrid *Thalasseus* terns are unlikely to exhibit all characters of either parent, but without genetic analysis, this remains difficult to ascertain. Despite this, in accordance with the current literature, the features of the tern described above are consistent with Elegant Tern, and in combination appear to represent the species.

RANGE AND EXTRALIMITAL OCCURENCES

The Elegant Tern is native to the Pacific coast of the Americas, and is known as a breeder from only five colonies in southern California and Baja California, Mexico. During the post-breeding season from May to November, individuals disperse northwards and southwards along the coast and during this time can be found as far north as northern California and south to Costa Rica. Occasionally the species experiences post-breeding “surges” along the coast north to Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, many of which seem to coincide with “El Nino” years when water temperatures in the eastern Pacific are higher than normal. Individuals are also reported rarely, but regularly during the spring and summer months away from the coast at the Salton Sea in extreme southern California. From December to February, the species winters along the coast from southern Mexico to as far south as central Chile, with the majority of the population wintering along the coastline south of Peru (Burness et al. 1999).

In North America, Elegant Terns have occurred as vagrants to the desert southwest, and the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic coasts. As of 2014, there are a total of 12 substantiated records from Arizona and five from New Mexico, all occurring during the post-breeding season from May to July (Roy and Pawlicki 2014). Along the Gulf coast, there are five records from Texas, one from Alabama, and nine from Florida. Regarding the Florida records, several sightings in the Tampa Bay area from October 1999 to April 2004 were of at least two individuals that paired and presumably bred with ‘American’ Sandwich Terns (*T.s. acuflavida*). Of the records along the mid-Atlantic coast, three have been from Virginia, one each from New Jersey and New York, and two from Massachusetts (Shoch and Howell 2013, Roy and Pawlicki 2014). Most unusual is a record of a breeding plumaged adult photographed at Little Pelican Island, Leech Lake, Cass County, Minnesota on 28 June 2007 (Mortensen 2008). Amazingly, the species has occurred several times as a vagrant to Europe where it has been recorded in Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany (Shoch and Howell 2013). In France in 1985, two Elegant Terns were documented breeding and producing hybrid offspring with ‘Eurasian’ Sandwich Terns (*T.s. sandvicensis*), some of which may have been responsible for records of apparent ‘Elegant Terns’ in Belgium and Ireland (Olsen and Larsson 1995, Kwater 2001).

Though impossible to ascertain, it would be reasonable to assume that an Elegant Tern ending up on the Niagara River would have reached this location by moving up the Atlantic coast and then turning inland to the west. Alternatively, an individual wandering to the Gulf coast and then continuing to move north and east through the interior of the continent, potentially under the influence of strong weather systems, would seem an equally plausible route as well.

The Elegant Tern detailed above provisionally represents the second record for New York State, and the first from upstate pending the acceptance of the state's first record of a first/second summer individual present only four months prior on 3-7 July 2013 at Cupsogue Beach County Park in Westhampton, Suffolk County. Additionally, the Elegant Tern's occurrence on the Niagara River represents a first record of the species for the Great Lakes region and a first for the province of Ontario, Canada as accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Kayo Roy, pers. comm.).

As a final note, on 17 November 2013, three days before the Elegant Tern was found on the Niagara River at Beaver Island State Park, a Royal Tern was reported flying northeast along the Lake Erie shoreline past Sunset Park in Willoughby, Lake County, Ohio by Jerry Talkington. After seeing the photographs of the Elegant Tern on the Niagara River a few days later, Talkington was convinced this was the same immature orange-billed tern that had flown past him at Sunset Park in Ohio (Jerry Talkington, pers. comm.). Given the extreme rarity of an orange-billed tern on Lake Erie in November, especially without the landfall of a tropical system, one would have to reasonably believe this was indeed the same individual that later appeared on the Niagara River.

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Figure 4: First-winter Elegant Tern in-flight over the Niagara River. Squaw Island Park, Buffalo, *Erie*, 21 November 2013. Photo © James M. Pawlicki.



First-winter Elegant Tern, Squaw Island Park, Buffalo, *Erie*, 21 Nov 2013. See article pp. 114-119. Figure 1 (top): Standing with Bonaparte's Gulls on the concrete pier at the north end of Squaw Island. Figure 2 (middle): In flight with Bonaparte's Gulls over the Black Rock Canal. Figure 3 (bottom): In flight over the Black Rock Canal. All photos © James M. Pawlicki.