

Sandwich Terns

I had an email the other day as follows:

“I saw a seabird which I couldn’t identify a few days ago at the Gann. It had a big wing span and a very forked tail and didn’t look like a gull. Looking through my pocket book could it have been a Sandwich Tern????”



Indeed it could have been. They are quite a common passage migrant through the Gann and elsewhere around the coast. Sometimes they just fly around calling – they have quite a harsh and strident call – and sometimes they settle for a preen and a rest. They can be seen in small groups in April then again in August.

So where are they going? Well, there are large colonies on Anglesey, and on the Irish coast, and also on the Isle of Man and the Cumbria coast, where they breed on sandy or shingly beaches or islands, often with other terns. They spend the winter primarily off the coast of West Africa with some birds going much further down to the west coast of southern Africa. So when we see them they are in transit between a beach somewhere in the Irish Sea and the coast of Africa.

Interestingly the winter locations of these birds are only so well-known because large numbers of the birds have been ringed in the UK as chicks. Once in West Africa, they are trapped by local children for food on the beaches, and the children have been trained to report the rings! Usually a seagoing bird like a tern would have very few ringing recoveries.



The Sandwich Tern is our largest British breeding tern – it is quite bulky in comparison with the smaller Common terns which we also sometimes see here. It looks very white in flight and has a black bill with a yellow tip which is surprisingly visible in the field. When heading north in April they have smart black caps but on their return in August they cap is starting to go partially white, and some of the birds may also be smudgy-looking immatures.

Sandwich Terns are one of the examples of birds which have been rather inappropriately named, often in a rather “southern eastern centric” way. Sandwich Terns do not, as far as I know, breed at Sandwich Bay any more, though they do still breed at other sites in Kent. Unlike the Kentish Plover, which has not bred in Kent, or indeed in the UK, for many years. Or how about the Dartford Warbler? The chances of seeing this little gorse-loving warbler anywhere near Dartford seem quite remote – though they do now breed in Pembrokeshire, on suitable gorsy cliff tops.

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