



About tern

David Chapman describes a resilient little bird that embarks on an Arctic-Antarctic round trip every year

Of all the astonishing and wonderful wildlife we have around the UK, the arctic tern has one very special claim. It is thought to have the longest migration of any bird species on earth.

Its breeding colonies are as far north as the Arctic though some nest in Ireland, Anglesey and the Farne Islands in Northumberland. In Britain, the biggest colonies are on the Northern Isles of Scotland (Orkney and Shetland).

In late summer, when the young have fledged, they migrate southwards, wintering in the Southern Ocean between the ice of Antarctica and the southern tips of South America and South Africa.

On its journey southwards, the arctic tern covers an average of 205 miles (330km) per day, the flight to the Antarctic region taking about 100 days. After a couple of months, it heads back at a slightly faster rate of about 311 miles (500km) per day, making use of global wind patterns. By the time it arrives at its nesting colony, it may have travelled as far as 50,000 miles, nearly 80,000km. So in a typical lifetime it might fly 1.5 million miles.

TOUGH BUT GRACEFUL

The arctic tern is a graceful flier, its pointed wings and deeply-forked tail reminiscent of a swallow's (it has, in fact, become known as the 'sea-swallow'). However, it is amazing that a creature that weighs only about 110g can survive such a massive migration.

Its nest is nothing more than a scrape in the beach or turf close to the shore. Generally, arctic terns nest in quite tightly packed colonies where they fearlessly protect their young.

Any intruder, regardless of size, will be mercilessly dive-bombed during the breeding season. One of the best places to

witness this behaviour is on Inner Farne, where the arctic terns have chosen to nest around a path – to get to the boat onto the island, visitors must risk being attacked! It's a good idea to wear a hard hat or carry something over your head.

I had never been struck by a tern until last summer, when I was innocently walking across a beach on Shetland. Unbeknown to me, there must have been a single pair somewhere near the strandline because, when I got within range, I was suddenly struck on the head by an incredibly sharp bill.

The bird's loud 'kick-kick-kaah-kaah' call came too late for me to take evasive action and, as I ran my fingers across my scalp, I felt blood. I put my hood up and made a dash for it.

Later, when I took one of my favourite bird books to bed for a read, I couldn't help but giggle about the instructions on how to distinguish a common from an arctic tern. A common tern has a dark tip on its orange-red bill, but the bill of an arctic tern is completely blood-red!

Main image: arctic terns are able fliers – a good job when you consider the miles they cover during migration

Below left: as part of courtship the male arctic tern is expected to feed the female



LOCATION OF THE MONTH

RSPB MINSMERE

Where: near Saxmundham, Suffolk

Directions: see rspb.org.uk

Nearest Club site: White House Beach

What to look for: Minsmere is one of the RSPB's most impressive reserves with a huge range of wildlife in a variety of habitats – including reedbed, woodland, heathland, beach, lagoon and marsh. In spring/summer, you may hear bitterns booming from the reedbeds; marsh harriers and hobbies regularly hunt over the marshes; nightingales sing from the scrub; avocets, Mediterranean gulls and common terns breed on the lagoons; sand martins nest in the sand bank near the café; Dartford warblers and nightjars nest on the heath where adders might be seen.

When to go: Any time of year, although early summer offers the chance to see a wide range of species

Facilities: Numerous hides, café, toilets, visitor centre, some wheelchair access

Contact: rspb.org.uk

