

American Black Tern *Chlidonias niger surinamensis* (hereafter referred to as just *surinamensis*) is currently treated as the Nearctic race of Black Tern *Chlidonias niger niger* which occurs in the Western Palearctic (hereafter referred to as just *niger*). The first accepted record of *surinamensis* for Britain was as relatively recent as October 1999 and since then there had been only two other records, until a juvenile was discovered at Prescott Reservoirs, Merseyside in late August 2012 and became the fourth record for Britain. The latter bird visited Eccleston Mere (also Merseyside) during its stay but after disappearing from either site on September 1st, I found this excellent little marsh tern to be present at Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, alongside a juvenile *niger* for some highly instructive comparison.

There have been some fairly comprehensive articles written on the identification of American Black Tern already, so this article is not meant in any way to be ground-breaking but merely to illustrate the important separation features and in particular, how distinctive the Pennington Flash *surinamensis* was.



Left: Juvenile American Black Tern, Eccleston Mere, Merseyside, September 2012 (Dave Kelsall). Here, despite the bright lighting burning out grey hues somewhat, the grey flanks of this fine *surinamensis* remain patently obvious. The black 'peg' or 'stole' on the breast sides is broad and was more extensive than the average *niger*; the solidly grey flanks merging with it and extending rearwards all the way to the rear edge of the wing. Also very obvious in this image is the head pattern. The

ear coverts are very dark, solidly black, yet the crown is noticeably paler, appearing greyish (giving rise to a look of it wearing little black headphones or ear muffs!) and the overall guise is similar to that of White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*. Note also the grey underwing coverts here too.



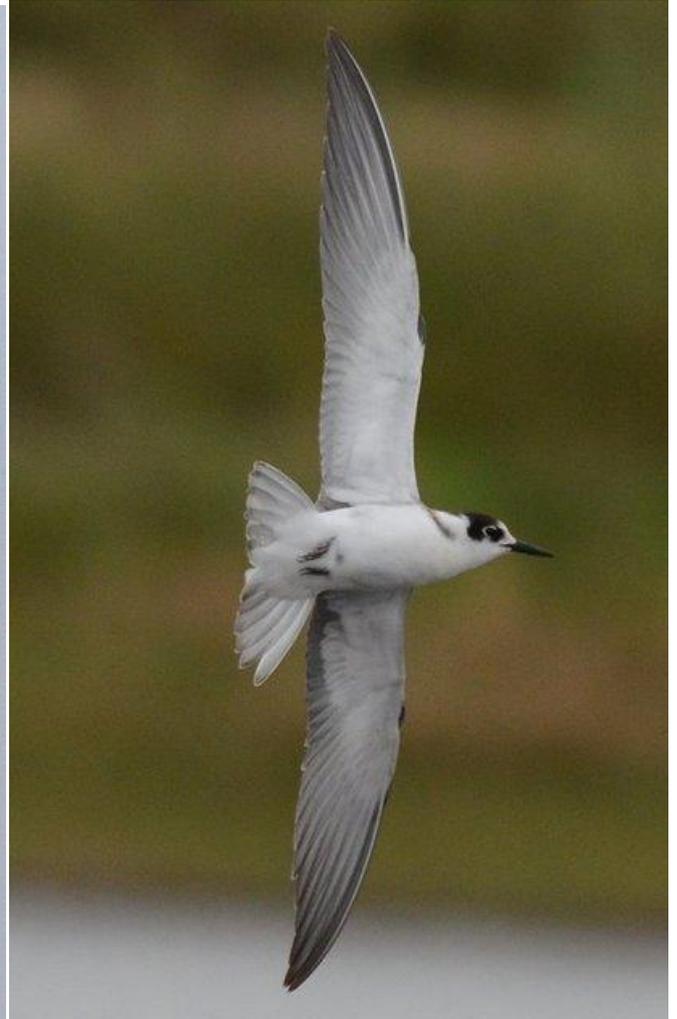
Above: Juvenile American Black Tern, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2012 (John Tymon). The lighting in this image permits the grey flanks to be more clearly discerned and the breast 'peg' remains evidently very extensive. Even in this image the contrast between the black ear coverts and grey crown is obvious.



Above: Juvenile Black Tern, Elton Reservoir, Greater Manchester, September 2011 (Dennis Atherton). The stark whiteness of the flanks and underwing coverts are plain to see here and the black breast 'peg', though slightly obscured by white breast feathering, is clearly smaller and neater than *surinamensis*. The head pattern of this *niger* is typical of this race; solidly black, extending well onto the forehead (here to a point clearly in front of the eye) with a fairly sharp demarcation against the white. Note that the rump is marginally paler grey than the tail and the feathers have fairly conspicuous broad pale edges which *surinamensis* lacks (see *surinamensis* image below).



Left: Juvenile American Black Tern, Greater Manchester, September 2012 (Ian McKerchar). The rump is mid-grey and particularly uniform in appearance, only very slightly (perhaps imperceptibly so under field conditions) paler than the tail and is practically concolourous with it and the back. Although any difference between the rump of *surinamensis* and *niger* is slight, the latter generally has broader pale fringes and the grey is very slightly paler giving rise to more contrast between it and the darker tail and back (see *niger* images below).



Above: Left, Juvenile American Black Tern, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2012 and right, juvenile Black Tern, Houghton Green Pool, Cheshire, August 2012 (John Tymon). The grey flanks of the *surinamensis* show well once again here as does the extensive black breast 'peg'. The underwing of *surinamensis* are dusky/pale grey (though somewhat in shadow here), opposed to the clear white underwings of the *niger*.



Above: Juvenile American Black Tern, Eccleston Mere, Merseyside, September 2012 (Dave Kelsall). Compare the above image to that of the Black Tern below. Note in particular the reduced pale fringes to the upperparts and upperwing coverts of *surinamensis*, lending to a much more overall uniform and subdued appearance, though the dark carpal bar and secondaries remain evident. This image was taken in bright sunlight which has magnified the brightness of the upperparts to maximum effect whereas the flat light found in dull conditions allows the true tonal value and pattern of the upperparts to be fully appreciated.



Above: Juvenile Black Tern, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2010 (John Tymon). Here the obvious broad pale fringes to the scapulars, tertials and wing coverts are apparent, as are their more significant internal markings; something much reduced on *surinamensis*. The extensive solid black head markings are undeniable and the saddle (mantle, back and scapulars) in particular is brighter brown, contrasting against the paler looking upperwing coverts.



Above: Juvenile American Black Tern, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2012 (Ian McKerchar). In this flat light, the true uniformity of the upperparts is clear, even at this relatively long distance. No pale edges to the feathers are apparent and the upperwing coverts look frankly the same hue of grey as the mantle. The head pattern remains consistent though, no matter what the distance, and the extensive white forehead and greyish crown are clear. It is also possible to make out the grey of the flanks below the closed wing such is their extensiveness.



Above: Juvenile Black Tern, Elton Reservoir, Greater Manchester, August 2010 (Dennis Atherton). Taken at roughly the same distance as the *surinamensis* in the image above, this *niger* portrays a stronger contrast between the mantle and upperwing coverts and their significant broad pale fringes are evident even at this range. Similarly, the head pattern is typically solidly black, with the black crown extending to just in front of, or at the very least, in line with the front of the eye.



Above: Juvenile American Black Tern (right) with Black Tern (left), Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2012 (Adam Jones). Whilst overall measurements of the two races are said to overlap considerably it is clear to see that as both birds are in pretty much the same plane and distance from the camera in this image, their size difference is blatantly obvious. This was very evident and somewhat surprising in the field too, where the *surinamensis* was considered some 10-15% smaller than the accompanying *niger* and perhaps as a result, appeared to have a somewhat more buoyant flight with quicker wing beats. Even in this long distance shot though, the grey flanks and underwing of the *surinamensis* show well, especially in comparison to gleaming white of the *niger*.



Above: Juvenile American Black Tern (left) and juvenile Black Tern (right), Pennington Flash, September 2012 (John Tymon). Again, the small size of the *surinamensis* is plainly evident here. Previous occurrences of *surinamensis* in the UK, when fortunate enough to have been seen alongside *niger* for comparison, have also mentioned the apparent incredibly small appearance of the American race.



Above and below: Juvenile Black Tern, Houghton Green Pool, Cheshire, August 2013 (John Tymon). This juvenile *niger* clearly possessed restricted patches of grey on the flanks and the breast 'peg' is on the larger side for its race, plus its underwings appear distinctly greyish. Regardless, there is no doubt of this bird's identity as a Black Tern though and observers should therefore be aware that such grey patches can conceivably occur and that underwings may appear greyish, perhaps more likely under specific lighting conditions; indicating that as always care and a considered approach with field observations should be undertaken. Note the pro Black Tern features of this bird though, with its solidly black and well defined crown; broad pale fringes to the upperwing coverts; and rather bright, gingery scapulars. Note on the image below how the rump is subtly paler grey and the feathers are edged whitish (compare with the *surinamensis* images above) but on a rapidly moving tern at distance this is obviously of limited value.





Above: Adult Black Tern, Elton Reservoir, Greater Manchester, September 2010 (Dennis Atherton). Adult Black Terns moulting out of breeding plumage in late summer (like this Elton Reservoir bird) could present a pitfall for the unwary. This individual, like many others at this stage of moult, displays greyish underwing coverts and grey on the flanks; both of which are considered features of juvenile American Black Tern. The grey on the flanks is clearly rather patchy though (and is not uniform across the entire flanks) and is also scattered more widely around the rest of the underparts. Ageing the bird is a key feature here and in the upper image the moult contrast in the wing is admirably portrayed, with the older browner feathers contrasting against the newer grey ones; indicative of an adult at this time of year.

References:

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Ian McKerchar, May 2013

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Above: Juvenile American Black Tern, Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, September 2012
(Ian McKerchar)