

Status and Occurrence of Elegant Tern (*Thalasseus elegans*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Elegant Tern (*Thalasseus elegans*) is a medium sized species of tern found breeding along the west coast of Mexico in the Gulf of California (Burness *et al.* 1999). Incredibly 95% of the world's population breeds on the island of Isla Rasa in the Sea of Cortez (Howell and Webb 2010). There is localized breeding along the Pacific Coast of the Baja to southern California (Howell and Webb 2010). The nesting season lasts from March to July with some post-breeding dispersal northward to southern California occurring from July to October (Howell and Webb 2010). The majority of the breeding population heads southward along the Pacific Coast of Mexico from July to October as birds head to their wintering grounds from Ecuador to Chile between the months of October to February (Clapp *et al.* 1993, Howell and Webb 2010). The Elegant Tern will wander further north of California in the fall in varying numbers depending on ocean temperatures and food supplies (Burness *et al.* 1999, Alderfer 2006). It appears the effects of El Nino can cause this species to move north during its post-breeding dispersal in massive numbers (Burness *et al.* 1999). In non El Nino years, the Elegant Tern can be all but absent north of California from Oregon to Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). However, the Elegant Tern moves northward in the fall regularly enough that it is no longer a review species in Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). There are well over 20 accepted state records and it appears the Elegant Tern will turn up almost annually in the State (OFO 2012). In Washington State, the Elegant Tern is also no longer a review species of the Washington Bird Records Committee with well over 20 accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2013). The Elegant Tern is listed as an irregular, rare to locally common visitor in the summer to the outer coast and inland marine habitats (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Given the number of records for Oregon and Washington State, the post-breeding dispersal range of the Elegant Tern has Oregon and Washington State shown as part of its normal expected range in the fall (Burness *et al.* 1999). In British Columbia, the Elegant Tern is a casually occurring species with over 25 Provincial records that are definitely linked to large El Nino events (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013). The Elegant Tern is an accidental species in the rest of North America with a handful of records widely scattered from around the continent (Sibley 2000). There are 6 accepted records for Texas by the Texas Bird Records Committee (TBRC 2015) with one bird found at Corpus Christi on July 25, 1889 (American Ornithologist's Union 1983) and at Lake Balmorhea, in west Texas, on December 25, 1985 (Williams 1985). There are 3 accepted records for Arizona (Stejskal and Witzeman 1988, Stejskal and Rosenberg 1990, AFO 2015). There are only a couple of widely scattered records from the East Coast of North America (Burness *et al.* 1999). The Elegant has amazingly been photographed in Europe and is listed as accidental in France (Lewington *et al.* 1992). In 1974, a

single individual was found in a colony of Sandwich Terns (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) at Arcachon, Gironde, France (Lewington *et al.* 1992). In 1984, 2 birds were present, both paired with Sandwich Terns (Lewington *et al.* 1992). In 1982 single birds were found in Ireland with one bird found at Carlingford Lough, Down District, Northern Ireland, and either the same bird or another individual was found at Ballymacoda, County Cork, Ireland (O'Sullivan and Smiddy 1988). A single individual was reported from Belgium in 1988 (Boesman 1992). There are other photographic records for Spain and Denmark (Welch 2007). There are further records of "orange-billed Terns" that fit the description of the Elegant Tern from other areas of Europe (Welch 2007). Of interest another Elegant Tern was found on Johnston Atoll, in the central Pacific Ocean in 1969 and incredibly this bird had been banded previously in 1966 at Western Salt Company, south San Diego Bay, in California (Amerson and Shelton 1976).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Elegant Tern is covered in all standard North American field guides. The Elegant Tern is a medium-sized tern, 390–420 mm in length (Blake 1977) and weighs about 260 grams (Tordesillas 1992). In the context of British Columbia, there is no other commonly occurring tern that looks similar to the Elegant Tern and identification should be fairly straightforward.

The Elegant Tern holds its breeding plumage from March to August (Sibley 2000). In breeding plumage this species has a black cap with a long shaggy crest (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This is the longest crest found in any tern species (Burness *et al.* 1999). The bill is long and slender, often exceeding the length of the bird's head, and is a light yellow to reddish orange colour with the tip often a yellow or light gray colour (Burness *et al.* 1999). The base of the bill is often red (Burness *et al.* 1999). The curvature of the culmen gives the illusion that the bill droops at the tip (Kaufman 1990, Olsen and Larsson 1995). The neck, throat and breast down to the undertail coverts is white, but underparts often have pink flush (Burness *et al.* 1999). The back, scapulars, and upper wings are bluish-gray in colour, contrasting with the darker gray outer primaries (Sibley 2000). Tail is deeply forked (Olsen and Larsson 1995). The legs are black, but sometimes will show splotches of yellow or orange, and are rarely bright red (Burness *et al.* 1999). The outer primaries darken with wear, becoming dark gray after the breeding season (Olsen and Larsson 1995). The Elegant Tern holds its winter plumage from August to February (Sibley 2000). In winter plumage, the adult bird's forehead and lores become white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The remaining black portion of the cap forms a triangular facial mask beginning around eye and continuing to the nape or the top of crest (Burness *et al.* 1999). Males and females look almost identical to each other in the field, but can have subtle differences in the bill (Burness *et al.* 1999). The adult females have a shorter, stouter yellower coloured bill, and

the males have a longer, more slender and more reddish-orange coloured bill (Burness *et al.* 1999).

The Elegant Tern holds its juvenile plumage from July to October (Sibley 2000). The juvenile plumage of the Elegant Tern is similar to adult birds in winter plumage except the back and the scapulars are mottled with brown (Burness *et al.* 1999). The upper wing-coverts and the primary-coverts are dark gray or brown with a scaly appearance (Burness *et al.* 1999). The median-coverts are pale gray, and the rectrices are a dark gray with dark tips and white edges (Burness *et al.* 1999). The remiges have pale tips on the inner primary and secondary feathers (Burness *et al.* 1999). The bill is shorter than that of the adult birds and it is a pale straw to light orange-red colour (Burness *et al.* 1999). There are blackish markings on the edges of upper mandible (Burness *et al.* 1999). The legs are black and the tarsus can occasionally be grayish-yellow (Burness *et al.* 1999). The feet are greenish or greenish-black, but this colour can be variable from yellow-orange to black (Burness *et al.* 1999). The bill and feet colouration are paler on average than those of the adult birds (Monroe 1956, Olsen and Larsson 1995).

The call of the adult Elegant Tern is a distinctive “*ke-e-e-r*” that drops in pitch at end (Burness *et al.* 1999). The juvenile birds give an insistent thin whistled “*sip-sip-sip*” (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Elegant Tern is a casually occurring species in British Columbia with 30 Provincial records. It was unrecorded in British Columbia prior to 1983 (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). In 1983 a massive warm water El Nino event occurred up the west coast of North America that pushed the Elegant Tern north in large numbers to coastal regions of Oregon, Washington State and British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Wahl *et al.* 2005). The majority of Provincial records come from the El Nino event of 1983 and 1992 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Of the 30 Provincial records, 8 occurred in 1983 and 12 occurred in 1992 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All records for British Columbia have come from coastal marine and inland marine habitats (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are no inland records for this species in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There is only 1 record of a bird occurring in the spring and early summer (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This bird was found by the authors at Jordan River on May 24, 2008, and was likely the same bird that was re-found, and photographed a couple of times in the Victoria area from June 29 to July 20, 2008 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All other records are of birds found in mid-July through October which would coincide with post-breeding dispersal (Burness *et al.* 1999, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The latest record for British Columbia is of a bird photographed at Cattle Point from November 1-3, 2012 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Given the frequency with which the

Elegant Tern heads north into California in the late summer and fall, and increased frequency of warm water El Nino events, it is very likely this species will be again found in British Columbia.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #28: Elegant Tern adult at Cattle Point on November 2, 2012.
Photos © Daniel Donnecke.

Table 1: Records of Elegant Tern for British Columbia:

- 1.(7) ad August 21-22, 1983: Rich Stallcup, mobs (RBCM Photo 864) 112th St. Boundary Bay, Delta (Hunn and Mattock 1984, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
 - (7) adults August 23, 1983: Doug Krag, Jo Ann Mackenzie, Hue Mackenzie, mobs: Blackie Spit, White Rock, Surrey (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(7) adults August 22, 1983: Wings Tour, and other observers (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon (Anonymous 1983k, Toochin *et al.* 2014)

- (5) adults August 23, 1983: (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon, Colwood (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 3.(7-4) adults August 23-24, 1983: Brian M. Kautesk, mobs (RBCM Photo 864) West end of Beecher St., Crescent Beach, White Rock, Surrey (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(2) adults September 1, 1983: Active Pass, Victoria side (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 5.(1) adult September 2, 1983: Clover Point, Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 6.(2) adult September 4, 1983: (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon, Colwood (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 7.(2) adult September 25, 1983: David Stirling: Cadboro Bay, Victoria (Anonymous 1983l, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 8.(2) adults October 25, 1983: David Stirling: near the R.V.Y. Club, Victoria (Anonymous 1984a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 9.(1) adult July 18, 1992: John Dorsey, mobs: foot of 112th St., Boundary Bay, Delta (Siddle 1992c, Davidson 1993, Dorsey 1996b)
- 10.(1-2) adult July 18-25, 1992: John Luce, Gerry Ansell, Rick Toochin, mobs: Roberts Bank Coal Port Jetty (Siddle 1992c, Davidson 1993, Dorsey 1996b)
- 11.(10) adult July 19, 1992: Clover Point, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 12.(25) adult July 25, 1992: Adrian Dorst, and other observers (photo) Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 13.(1) adult July 25, 1992: Ron Satterfield: Clover Point, Victoria (Siddle 1992c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 14.(5) adult August 2, 1992: Vi B. Chungranes, Barbara M. Sedgewick: Deep Bay, north of Parksville-Qualicum (Siddle 1993a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 15.(1) adult August 8, 1992: mobs: Clover Point, Victoria (Bain and Holder 1992d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 16.(1) adult August 8, 1992: mobs: Island View Beach, near Victoria (Bain and Holder 1992d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 17.(6-1) adult September 12-13, 1992: Derrick Marven, mobs (photo) Clover Point, Victoria (Bain and Holder 1992e, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 18.(2) adult September 19, 1992: David F. Fraser: Sidney Island, south of Sidney (Siddle 1993a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 19.(1) adult September 21, 1992: *fide Victoria Rare Bird Alert*: Active Pass, Victoria side (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 20.(1) adult September 23, 1992: John Dorsey: Tsawwassen Ferry Jetty, Tsawwassen (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 21.(1) adult July 25, 1993: Keith Taylor: Clover Point, Victoria (Bain and Holder 1993d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 22.(1) adult September 5, 1997: Dannie Carsen (videotape) Clover Point, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 23.(1) adult October 4, 1997: Neil Hughes: Jordan River (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

- 24.(1) adult August 20, 1999: James Bradley, and other observers: Cottam Point, Parksville (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 25.(1) adult May 24, 2008: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Jordan River (Cecile 2008a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 26.(1) adult June 29 & July 1, 2008: Al Teng (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon, Colwood [likely same bird as above] (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 27.(1) adult July 20, 2008: Mike Shepard: 10 Mile Point, Saanich [likely same bird as above] (Cecile 2008b, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 28.(1) adult winter plumage November 1-3, 2012: Steven Roias, and other observers (photo) Cattle Point, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 29.(2) immatures September 3, 2015: John Purves: Englishmen River Estuary (J. Purves Pers. Comm.)
- 30.(1) immature September 4, 2015: Pierre Geoffray: off Captain Island, Sunshine Coast (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Elegant Tern records in British Columbia:

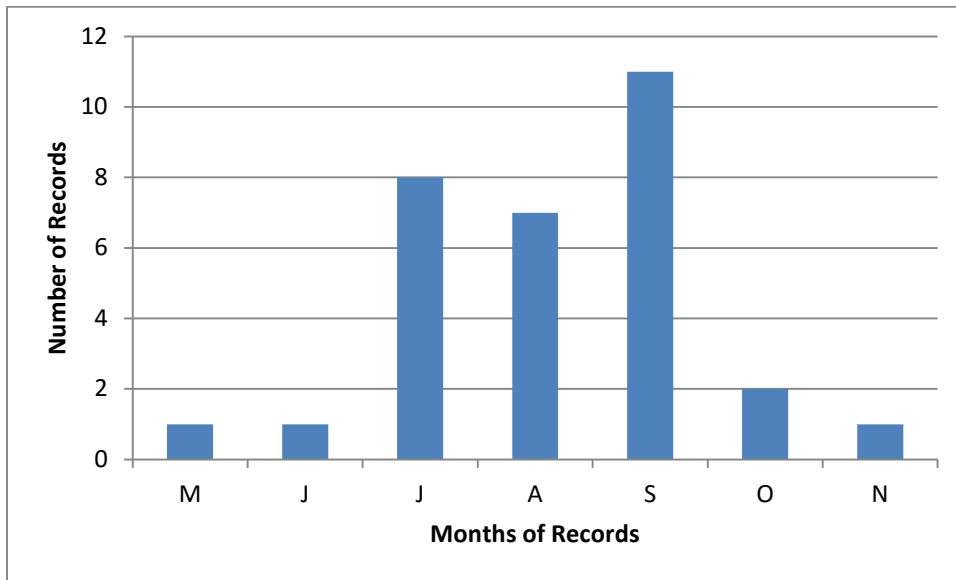


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the summer of this species with July, August and September having the highest number of records.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Don Cecile for editing the manuscript of this article. We also wish to thank Daniel Donnecke for giving us permission to use his photographs of an Elegant Tern taken at Cattle Point. Thanks to Melissa Hafting and John Purves for giving us information on the most recent Provincial sighting on the Sunshine Coast. All photographs are used in here with the permission of the photographer and are protected by copyright law. Photographs are not to be

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