

Notes

A marsh tern showing mixed characters of Black and White-winged Black Terns

In mid November 2009, an unfamiliar marsh tern appeared at Al Wathba Lake, some 40 km east of Abu Dhabi, UAE. Among some 40 Whiskered *Chlidonias hybrida* and two White-winged Black Terns *C. leucopterus*, it was distinctly darker and appeared superficially like a Black Tern *C. niger* (and was first reported as such).

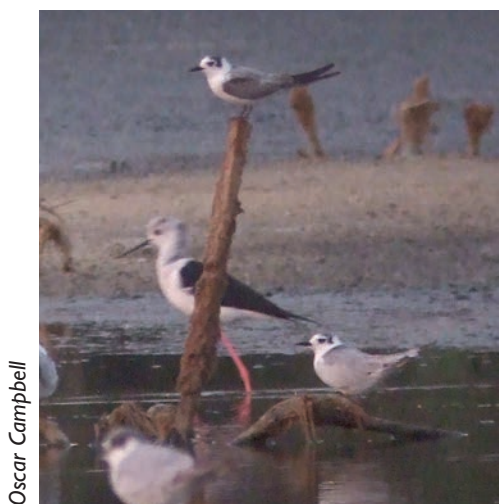
The Black Tern is a rarity in the UAE (12 accepted records to 2009), so I studied the bird carefully on my next visit, when I was surprised to be unable to detect any shoulder patches. On subsequent visits, seeing the bird at close range, I could confirm that the expected shoulder patches really were non-existent and I began to ponder the validity of the identification. Some key field characters of the bird are described below.

The head pattern was generally closest to White-winged Black, albeit one in juvenile rather than adult non-breeding plumage. The white behind the ear-coverts extended higher up than the level of the eye making the black on the nape narrow and difficult to see in profile. This, the lack of shoulder patches and the rather short bill (similar to the White-winged Black Terns alongside) all suggested that species. However, the crown was exten-

sively dark and merged solidly into the ear-covert mark (which therefore didn't appear as an isolated spot), a feature arguably more suggestive of Black Tern.

The upperparts were more reminiscent of Black Tern, in the field appearing darker grey than the accompanying White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns, with a somewhat sooty tinge (making the bird easily separable, even at long range, from the other terns). The primaries formed a strong, blackish wedge on the folded wing, the blackish lesser coverts formed a solid bar on the closed wing, and the median and greater coverts were similar to the mantle and scapulars but with a dull brownish cast, strongest on the tertials and inner greater coverts. The rump was dark, concolorous with the tail and saddle. The underside of the remiges was extensively dusky, forming a dark trailing edge.

The uniformly fresh primaries, lacking moult contrast, suggested that the bird was a first-winter (primary moult in adults of both species begins in summer and a few innermost primaries are normally replaced before autumn migration; *BWP*). If it was a first-winter, then the mantle and scapulars had clearly been completely replaced in the post-



Oscar Campbell



Oscar Campbell

13 & 14. Marsh tern resembling Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*, but with some characters of White-winged Black Tern *C. leucopterus*, UAE, November 2009 (pictured here with White-winged Black (right-hand bird in plate 13) and Whiskered Terns *C. hybrida*).

juvenile moult, as they were uniform dark grey.

Subsequent discussion with other birders provoked a range of opinions; on the basis of the photographs, a majority leant towards White-winged Black on account of the head pattern, lack of shoulder patches and short bill. However, if it was a first-winter of that species, then it was unusually dark, lacked certain classic features (e.g. a contrasting white rump) and had seemingly moulted its juvenile saddle feathers but not its head feathers. The remaining option is, of course, a hybrid Black

× White-winged Black Tern. Juvenile terns showing mixed characters have been described before in southwest England (*Brit. Birds* 73: 223–225; 75: 579–580) but both had the field appearance of White-winged Black with some features of Black, rather than, as in the case of the Wathba bird, vice versa.

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Oscar Campbell, British School Al Khubairat, PO Box 4001, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Jizz of 'eastern' Common Nightingale

Common Nightingales *Luscinia megarhynchos* are regular and sometimes quite numerous on spring passage through Abu Dhabi, UAE, in April and early May. Many, though not all, show characters associated with the easternmost form, *L. m. golzii*¹ (or *golzii/africana* intergrades). In contrast, Thrush Nightingale *L. luscinia* is much scarcer (but annual, usually in late April/early May). During four years of observing nightingales on spring passage, I have found that a reliable early indication of the species involved is given by watching the bird's behaviour. Almost invariably, Common Nightingales show a striking mannerism with their tail that is not matched by Thrush Nightingales. Typically, they frequently dip and pump their tail in an exaggerated manner and also sway it laterally, while gently fanning it. The manner superficially resembles that of Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* (but that species tends to cock its tail more abruptly, hold it vertically for much longer and doesn't sway it in the same, easy, sweeping manner). The overall effect is actually very reminiscent of Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida* and certainly just as habitual. This behaviour is normally apparent even on the briefest of views or when the bird is mostly obscured by foliage. In contrast, Thrush Nightingale shows relatively minimal tail movements during prolonged observation. Normally, the tail is

frequently held motionless, often just above the level of the primaries, and only slightly and briefly cocked as the bird hops forward or suddenly stops. Nightingales provisionally identified using this feature alone and then observed more closely, when diagnostic plumage features could be seen, were invariably confirmed as the species that the observed tail movements had suggested.

This feature is not mentioned in most of the popular field guides and handbooks. Only Harris *et al.* (1996) referred to tail movements as a discriminatory feature between the two nightingales and very brief details (somewhat in contradiction to the above) are provided. This character may be peculiar to *L. m. golzii* (and *L. m. africana?*), both of which have a significantly longer tail than nominate *megarhynchos* (*BWP*). If it is true that *megarhynchos* does not fit the pattern described here, then any Common Nightingale in western Europe exhibiting obvious and repeated tail movements should be examined very carefully as a candidate for *golzii/africana*.

References

- Harris, A., Shirihai, H., & Christie, D. 1996. *The Macmillan Birder's Guide to European and Middle Eastern Birds*. Macmillan, London.
- Knox, A. G., Collinson, J. M., Parkin, D. T., Sangster, G., & Svensson, L. 2008. Taxonomic recommendations for British birds: fifth report. *Ibis* 150: 833–835.

Oscar Campbell, British School Al Khubairat, PO Box 4001, Abu Dhabi, UAE

¹ Note that the name *golzii* has replaced *hafizi* for the easternmost population of the Common Nightingale (Knox *et al.* 2008).