



WEST MARIN WILD



By Jeff Miller

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Simply Elegant

If you like your birds raucous and unruly, August is prime time to head down to Bolinas Lagoon to watch the bird show. When the anchovies are in town, the avian feeding frenzy can be spectacular, and right now the elegant terns in the lagoon and just offshore are going absolutely nuts.

The elegant tern (*Sterna elegans*) is one of three bird species that local birder Keith Hansen calls “the boys of summer,” along with the brown pelican and Heermans’s gull. These birds all breed elsewhere, but faithfully arrive in Bolinas for the post-breeding season all you can eat fish buffet.

We commonly see three different species of terns in Bolinas – Caspian, elegant, and Forster’s terns. Hordes of elegant terns will gather in spectacular flocks, wheeling over the lagoon or streaming out the channel to the open Pacific, diving on anchovies with a crescendo of cacophonous cries resembling a deranged orchestra of squeaky toys. Elegant terns feed entirely on small fish that they catch close to shore. Their entertaining foraging technique is to hover elegantly, fluttering and floating like tossed handkerchiefs, then to plunge-dive onto the fish.

Elegant terns can accumulate here in truly stunning flocks – last year Keith estimated 13,000 terns were in the lagoon at one point. So far about 3,000 to 4,000 elegant terns have showed up and the peak will be from mid to late August.

How can you tell the terns apart? All three species have orange-ish bills, black head caps, forked tails, and the pointed wings typical of terns. Elegant terns make a loud grating *keerick* or *karreek*, while the Caspian tern will blurt out *kaark* or *ka-arr*. See the difference?

The Caspians are our largest terns, sporting a large, thick, orange bill with a black tip. The elegants are large terns with a long orange or yellow bill, a black cap ending in a shaggy crest, and a deeply forked tail. Elegant terns have longer and thinner bills than Caspians, and no black tip on their bill, which the Caspian and smaller Forster’s have. The larger Caspians are usually more solitary, so if you see flocks of terns – they are elegant terns.

Elegant terns nest almost exclusively on islands in the northern Gulf of California, north to San Diego. The elegant tern is a California “Species of Special Concern” because of its limited nesting areas, human and canine disturbances at nesting sites in San Diego, and military activities at the only U.S. breeding colony at Camp Pendleton. It seems the military’s tanks and helicopters put a definite damper on the amour of terns.

Small populations of Caspian terns nest at two locations in San Francisco Bay and at Elkhorn Slough. Elegant terns move north along the Pacific Coast after the breeding season as far north as British Columbia and some will also winter as far south as Peru and Chile.

The best place to watch the elegant, yet chaotic, avian choreography of diving and dining is in Bolinas Lagoon, where the terns roost on sandbars at low tide. Try the end of Wharf Road, anywhere along Highway 1 on the east side, or better yet, from a kayak on the lagoon. The surfer’s overlook on Terrace is another great vantage point when terns are feeding just offshore. You can also see elegant terns at Limantour E.tero.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.