



CTYBC TIPS

for birding the Gulf Coast

TERN TIPS

Terns found in April on the Texas Gulf Coast: Caspian, Royal, Sandwich, Common, Forster's, Least, Gull-billed, Black.

1. Look first at the bill. The bill color or pattern is distinctive in the breeding season.

Orange =	Royal Tern
Red with dark tip =	Caspian Tern
Orange-red with black tip =	Common Tern
Orange with black tip =	Forster's Tern
Yellow with black tip =	Least Tern
Black with light tip =	Sandwich Tern
Black and very thick =	Gull-billed Tern
Black =	Black Tern
 2. Look at the size. This is especially easy when the terns are all sitting in a group together on the beach.
 - Caspian is the biggest—21"
 - Royal is a little smaller than Caspian, but still large—20"
 - Common, Sandwich, Forster's, and Gull-billed are medium—12-15"
 - Least and Black are the smallest—9"
 3. Look at the head cap. In breeding plumage they all have a black cap, but there are subtle differences.
 - Caspian, Royal and Sandwich have flat caps with a crest at the back.
 - Common, Gull-billed and Forster's have no rear crest.
 - Least has a white forehead.
 - Black Tern even in April may still have a black and white face as it begins to acquire its black breeding plumage.
 4. Wing color and tail length and shape are deceptive, because terns go through multiple molts in each year.
 5. A tern with a fish in its mouth after a dive may look like it has a light tip like the Sandwich Tern. The tip colors are hard to see in flight, so don't assume it doesn't have one even if you can't see it clearly.
 6. Tern calls are distinctive, and it pays to get to know them in the field.
 7. The flight shape and types of wing beats can help identify terns once you have watched them flying back and forth and hovering before diving. In a windy feeding location the differences in wing beats are much less distinct.
 8. Common and Black Terns only migrate through, and so are less common, while the others are there all Spring and longer.
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