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flight of the tern

STEUNA PARADISAEA to the ornithologist, better known as arctic tern to most of us, is a summer visitor whose arrival after a journey of unprecedented length is greeted with little fanfare. The tern is easily distinguished from the gull by its long, pointed wings and forked tail which give it a striking shape and graceful flight, much like that of a barn swallow. On closer inspection, a blood-red beak set against the black forehead will separate the arctic from other species of terns.

The arrival of terns to Kodiak and the arctic coast of Alaska brings to an end a flight of nearly 11,000 miles from winter quarters in the Antarctic Sea, a journey unequalled by any bird. The route taken by this pugnacious bird is circuitous which means it flies nearly 25,000 miles annually to enjoy a continuous summer at opposite ends of the earth. During April, the earliest terns may be observed in graceful flight over the shallow waters of Middle and Kalsin bays on Kodiak Island. Their activities generally consist of feeding, harassing any gull or eagle that passes by or just quarreling among themselves. By June most have selected mates.

Noisy Nests

Birds may be found nesting in colonies or singly on Tugidak Island and many of the smaller islands which surround Kodiak. Anything but peace and harmony



prevails in a colony of nesting terns. When not quarreling or striking at their neighbors with lance-like beaks, they are shrieking their displeasure at each other or simply trying to vocally outrival others in the area.

The nest is often only a shallow depression in a gravel beach. Occasionally a scanty collection of vegetation is used to line the depression. Generally the nest will contain two olive and brown spotted eggs which hatch about mid-June. The downy young,



***SUMMER VISITOR**—Graceful arctic tern spends summer in Alaska after 11,000-mile flight from southern hemisphere.*

***AVIAN ACTOR**—Semipalmated plover nests in Alaska, winters in South America. It often feigns injury to distract intruders from nest.*



***TERN NEST**—Typical tern nest is shallow depression on a gravel beach. Olive and brown spotted eggs hatch about mid-June.*

(Jack Alexander photos)

except for their white breast and red beak, resemble the egg from which they have just emerged. The young, being very precocious, generally abandon the nest within a day or two after hatching. When approached, young terns remain motionless rather than running, preferring to make the most of their camouflaged coloring. Terns are frantic in their resentment of intrusions to the nesting area. When an observer approaches a nest, he is generally met with a series of screams and dives at his head. Occasionally a more daring bird will strike the intruder.

By early September, the new generation is fully feathered and ready for the long trip to the warm waters of Chile, Argentina or South Africa. The small green islands that had been home to a colony of noisy, hyperactive birds suddenly become quiet and colorless as the gray fall skies, and void of any sign of these summer residents.

Plover Visits

Another South American visitor to the Kodiak area is the semipalmated plover. This dainty little plover is a bird of the beaches and margins of small lakes and is generally found in single nesting pairs. The plover resembles the more common kildeer and is easily identified by its plump body and dark breast band.

Like the tern, plovers are ground nesters and often have as many as four young which are able to leave the nest right after hatching. The parents frequently feign injury to draw intruders away from the nest. This display may become very spectacular with the bird tumbling along the ground with spread tail and drooping wings, uttering piteous cries, but always managing to stay just out of reach.

Watch for these birds along the road system. Their often humorous antics can make a trip interesting and entertaining. ■

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