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## Birds of Colombia 2012

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[www.ProAves.org](http://www.ProAves.org)

Dirección: Carrera 20 No. 36–61, La Soledad, Bogotá

Teléfonos: +57–1–2455134 / 57–1–3403239; Fax: +57–1–340 3285

### **Fotografía portada / Cover photograph**

The first ever published photograph in life of Santa Marta Wren *Troglodytes monticola*, an Endangered and Colombian endemic species restricted to a highly degraded timberline ecotone in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. By Juan Carlos Luna. All rights reserved © Fundación ProAves.

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# New records of Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* for Colombia

## *Nuevos registros de Sterna forsteri para Colombia*

**Forrest Rowland & Bernard Master**

PO Box 246, Big Timber, MT 59011 USA. Email: [rowbird2005@gmail.com](mailto:rowbird2005@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

We present details of the second record of Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* for Colombia. Two individuals were observed, and photographed at Los Camarones on the Guajira Peninsula, 16-17 March 2011.

### **Resumen**

*Se presentan detalles del segundo registro de Sterna forsteri para Colombia. Dos individuos de esta especie fueron observados y fotografiados en la reserva Los Camarones, Guajira, 16-17 de Marzo del 2011.*

### **Introduction**

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* is a migrant Tern species that breeds across the United States of America, with small populations just South of the US border with Mexico along the Colorado River Drainage in northeast Baja California, northwest Sonora, and disjunctly along the Gulf Coast in northern Veracruz. Its breeding habitat is mostly confined to freshwater marshes and ponds, with several large populations along the Mid-Atlantic Coastal, Gulf of Mexico, and Pacific Coastal tidal marshes and sheltered bays (Sibley 2003). Its active breeding range extends as far North as central Manitoba and Saskatchewan, northern Canada (McNicholl *et al.* 2001). The species' primary wintering range extends from the northern coast of California, USA, south along the Pacific coast through Honduras. Forster's Tern also winters along the Atlantic Coast of the United States from the Delaware Bay south, through coastal Florida, and along the length of the coast of the Gulf of Mexico (Sibley 2003). The wintering population's range nearly extends to Belize, though no verified records from that country exist (McNicholl *et al.* 2001). It has also been recorded outside this range as a long-distant vagrant, including on multiple occasions to the western Palearctic (Svensson *et al.* 2010).

Forster's Tern is poorly known in South America and considered a rare accidental for Colombia (McMullan, *et al.* 2010). There is an historical record from off the Atlantic coast of Brazil (Meyer de Schauensee 1966, Sick 1997, Remsen *et al.* 2012). The species was also recently recorded on the Caribbean coast of South America, at Los Camarones, in 2010 (Downing 2009, Donegan *et al.* 2010) although no photograph has yet been published.

### **Discussion**

On March 16, 2011, the authors visited Riohacha, Guajira Peninsula, arriving at approximately 1300 hrs and at Los Camarones a little after 1600 hrs. Bernard Master noticed a small *Sterna* tern foraging some 120 meters away. The individual settled on a nearby (60m) sandbank and photographs were then obtained (Figs. 1-4). The bird was clearly a Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*. There were sight records of two birds of the same species seen by Samuel Hansson and Antonio Salvadori at Los Flamencos on 16 March 2011, with only one of the two birds still present the next day (Kirwan *et al.* 2012). Because there was only one individual, this may have been one of the two birds observed on the same day at Los Flamencos but which was not also present on the 17<sup>th</sup> or that there had been a small influx of the species to northernmost of Colombia.





**Figures 1 a-d.** Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* on March 16, 2011, at Los Camarones, Riohacha, Guajira Peninsula.

Both observers have extensive experience with Forster's Tern in breeding, wintering, and juvenile plumages. Despite the likelihood of some slight variation in bill length and mantle color between certain populations of Forster's Tern, the individual encountered on March 16<sup>th</sup> displayed all invariable, salient features to be looked for in this species. Migratory *Sterna* species that could pose confusion or complication of identification in the region include Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*, Arctic Tern *Sterna*, and Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalli*. Of the four species in question, Forster's Tern would be the most likely to show bright orange leg coloration in non-breeding plumage (Sibley 2003). Leg length (Fig. 1, Fig. 4) rules out Arctic Tern as a possible candidate. The face pattern and lack of dark coloration on the nape, lower crown, and general nuchal area, though variable in all species, is not as pale in the other species as it is in Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri* (Fig. 1, Fig. 4). In particular, the relatively broad eye mask is a good mark for this species. The mantle coloration (Fig. 3) is consistent with Forster's Tern and the lack of any visible carpal bar (Fig. 1-4) excludes Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* as a possibility and makes Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalli* unlikely (Kaufman 1990, Sibley 2003). To

positively conclude that the individual in question was a Forster's Tern, we closely examined the length of primaries versus the length of the tail. This was consistent with Forster's Tern, but did not entirely rule out Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalli*. The bill of the bird in question did not show the slim, slightly-decurved, decidedly lengthy bill of Roseate Tern (Kaufman 1990), but rather was broad-based and straight-edged, as in Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*. At this point in the observers' mental inventory of field marks, primary coloration was reassessed for a firm conclusion that we had seen, and photographed, a Forster's Tern.

The following morning, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the authors returned to Los Camarones at approximately 0950 hrs to attempt to relocate the Tern, as well as other noteworthy species observed the previous day (such as Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*). The observers found two individuals on this occasion, identical in plumage to the bird photographed the previous day, foraging together with other Tern *Sterna* species. These two individuals were more distant (70-250 m distance) and photographs were not obtained. Definitive views were had of both individuals in flight, and perched, which allowed us to conclude that two individual Forster's Terns *Sterna forsteri* were present at the site. Total lapsed observation time of these individuals during March 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> approached, but did not exceed, 60 minutes.

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**Fundación ProAves**  
**Carrera 20 No. 36-61**  
**Bogotá, Colombia**  
**Tels: +57-1-245.5134 /340.3239**  
**Fax: +57-1-340.3285**  
**Email: fundacion@proaves.org**

**[www.proaves.org](http://www.proaves.org)**

