

TOP SPOT

WORDS & PICTURES
MARK D ANDERSON

TAKE TERNs

A good time to see terns is in the early evening, when they return to the roost. This is a time that conveniently coincides with beach walks and sundowners, says Mark D Anderson.



STAR TERN. The attractive red-billed Caspian tern is by far the largest tern you'll see in southern Africa.

Where and when can I see terns?

Almost anywhere along the coast is good for tern-watching, but estuaries are the best (they like to roost in an isolated spot, such as a sand bar). For the most part, terns fish during the daylight hours, so look for them in the early evening when they return to the roost.

Some species, including the Caspian tern, fish close to shore. Swift and sandwich terns often rest at harbours and on rocks during the day.

Whereas most terns are associated with the ocean, you may spot white-winged, whiskered and Caspian terns inland.

Many species are migratory, so looking for terns is like watching cricket, a summer activity.

What should I look for? It's tricky to tell apart some of the 19 tern

species found in South Africa, as the differences are so subtle.

Take along a pair of binoculars – or, better still, a good spotting scope – and a field guide. Look at size, the colour of the bill and legs, the extent of the markings on the head, and subtle differences in plumage.

What if I find a ring? Thousands of terns are ringed at breeding sites around the world. A general rule for beach-walkers is to examine the legs of all dead birds for small metal rings.

Report the ring number, date, locality and any other useful detail to the South African Bird Ringing Unit at the University of Cape Town (☞ safring@adu.uct.ac.za).

Your recovery may reveal a 20-year-old Arctic tern ringed 10 000 km away in Greenland!

Is there a top spot to see terns?

One of the best places in South Africa to see terns is Cape Recife, a 3 km² nature reserve that protects the fragile shoreline and sand dunes at the southern end of Algoa Bay, south-east of Port Elizabeth. Look for terns on the beach or near the rocks in front of the lighthouse.

Among various tern species, you should see roseate terns all year round, but most numerous from April to July. The Antarctic tern is there in the winter months. The Damara is erratic, but occasionally seen in winter. The Caspian is there all year. Also look for the bridled tern, a vagrant to South Africa, seen at the Cape Recife roost for several years now.

There's a bird hide that is well worth a visit in the early morning, when the sun is behind it.

Where? The Cape Recife Nature Reserve is near PE. The entrance is off Marine Drive, just past the Pine Lodge Resort and Conference Centre.

Cost? A permit that's valid for one week costs R28 (get one at the Pine Lodge).

Hours? The reserve is open 24 hours, but it's staffed by security personnel only during the day.

Security? Watch out for perlemoen poachers.

Contact: ☎ 041 583 4004 ☑

ODD ONE OUT (left). Large flocks of common terns roost on sand bars at estuaries. A search among the flocks may reveal an interesting vagrant, like the bridled tern.

FAIR-WEATHER FRIEND (below). The white-winged tern spends the austral summer in southern Africa. Look for it at inland wetland sites.

