

Bird of the month – the Whiskered Tern

Terns are inveterate travellers

The incredible migration of the Arctic Tern, which circumnavigates the globe annually is well-known to most people. All 44 members of the tern family worldwide are designed for long-distance movements, and have proportionately long, narrow wings and a light body, with a resulting buoyant flight. Our Whiskered Tern is no exception – it is a strong and swift flier, and the resident population found in the Okavango and Chobe areas is augmented during summer by birds that migrate to Botswana from north and eastern Africa. Many individuals are nomadic, and quickly colonise new suitable habitat – and this explains the influx of birds to places like Lake Ngami in mid-winter, when it floods.



The Whiskered Tern is a graceful bird with long, narrow wings (Photo: P Hancock)

A further characteristic of their flight, is the way they plunge-dive and surface-dip, catching small, surface-swimming fish or frogs, or plucking insects from just above the water. They are lively, active birds and a large flock, while foraging, presents a white shimmer of wheeling, diving, vibrant birds.

Lake Ngami is undoubtedly the best place to see this species in Botswana. It occurs in such high numbers that it is regarded as a 'trigger species' for the lake – one that qualifies this wetland as an Important Bird Area. As

soon as the floodwaters reach Lake Ngami in June every year, Whiskered Terns arrive and immediately start breeding – without waiting even to change into their breeding plumage!



A Whiskered Tern has almost completed its breeding without having attained full breeding plumage (Photo: M Kamakama)

The nest is a flimsy - but adequate - floating structure constructed by both sexes from stems of sedges or grasses; sometimes it is situated on the floating waterweed *Ludwigia stolonifera*. The clutch comprises 1 to 3 beautiful greenish-brown eggs with dark chocolate-brown blotches.



This nest, constructed from grass stems, is supported by a mat of Oxygen Weed (Photo: P Hancock)

Whiskered Terns breed in small colonies, and will vigorously dive-bomb any predators such as Monitor Lizards and Pythons that approach the site.



[This pair, with black 'caps', is in full breeding plumage \(Photo: P Hancock\)](#)

By October, which is when this species starts breeding according to the books, the first arrivals at Lake Ngami will already have raised their brood! Birds continue breeding throughout summer, until April, making this area of vital importance for the species. This is just one of the reasons why Lake Ngami is regarded as one of the most important bird conservation sites in southern Africa.

Pete Hancock