Tracking of Arctic terns *Sterna paradisaea* reveals longest animal migration


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The study of long-distance migration provides insights into the habits and performance of organisms at the limit of their physical abilities. The Arctic tern *Sterna paradisaea* is the epitome of such behavior; despite its small size (≤125 g), banding recoveries and at-sea surveys suggest that its annual migration from boreal and high Arctic breeding grounds to the Southern Ocean may be the longest seasonal movement of any animal. Our tracking of 11 Arctic terns fitted with miniature (1.4-g) geolocators revealed that these birds do indeed travel huge distances (more than 80,000 km annually for some individuals). As well as confirming the location of the main wintering region, we also identified a previously unknown oceanic stopover area in the North Atlantic used by birds from at least two breeding populations (from Greenland and Iceland). Although birds from the same colony took one of two alternative southbound migration routes following the African or South American coast, all returned on a broadly similar, sigmoidal trajectory, crossing from east to west in the Atlantic in the region of the equatorial Intertropical Convergence Zone. Arctic terns clearly target regions of high marine productivity both as stopover and wintering areas, and exploit prevailing global wind systems to reduce flight costs on long-distance commutes.

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**Results and Discussion**

With an accuracy of ~185 km in flying seabirds (23), the geolocators were used to document the migration routes, stopover sites, and wintering areas of Arctic terns from colonies in high-Arctic Greenland (n = 10) and Arctic Iceland (n = 1). At the end of the breeding season, tagged birds traveled southwest to a stopover region of deep water in the eastern portion of the Newfoundland Basin and the western slope of the mid-North Atlantic Ridge between 41°–53° N and 27°–41° W, in which they remained for an average ± SD of 24.6 ± 6 days (Fig. 1). This previously unknown oceanic hotspot for terns was located at the junction between cold, highly productive northern water and warmer, less-productive southern water, and was characterized by high Chl. a concentrations and high eddy variability (24, 25). Between 5 and 22 September 2007, all 11 birds continued their migration southeast toward the Weddell Sea, started their southward migration, and wintered in the Weddell Sea. This region, which includes the Weddell Sea, is particularly productive, and supports higher densities of a key prey

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for many seabirds, Antarctic krill (*Euphausia superba*), than elsewhere in the Southern Ocean (26).

All birds began the return migration to breeding colonies in early–mid April, always traveling over deep water at considerable distance from continental shelf margins, and taking a sigmoidal route, counterclockwise around the South Atlantic and clockwise around the North Atlantic gyres. Upon return in late May to the same general stopover region in the North Atlantic used during the southbound migration, two individuals transited rapidly west through the area, three remained there for 3–6 days before continuing to the north, and the remaining five birds appeared not to pause or deviate from their general course. Thus, there was little indication that the area was particularly important for northbound terns. Although the Arctic tern from Iceland began its outbound and return migration earlier than the Greenland-breeding birds (Table 1), there was no obvious difference in migration routes between this individual and some of the terns from Greenland. Thus, the emerging pattern for transequatorial migrants is of a high degree of mixing of birds from different breeding populations in wintering areas, as evident in this study and previous ones (5, 7, 27). This contrasts with the dominant strategies of southern hemisphere albatrosses, which, despite a similar capacity for long-distance migration and hence overlap, nevertheless tend to show a high degree of between-population segregation in nonbreeding distributions (28).

The Greenlandic birds exhibited clear synchrony in timing of migration, all reaching the North Atlantic stopover site, departing the wintering area and crossing the Equator within a few days of each other (Table 1), but there was no indication that they traveled together in the same flocks. Similarly, at-sea observations suggest that flock sizes of migrating terns are typically very small (<15 birds) (17), and recent results (7) from studies of other migrant seabirds also indicate high levels of synchrony in timing of passage through restricted flyways and no evidence of persistent associations between individuals (including members of a pair).

The routes used for both the southbound and northbound migrations showed a high level of congruence with parts of those taken by Manx shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*) and Cory’s shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*), which also winter in the South Atlantic, albeit considerably farther north than Arctic terns (5, 6). It would appear, therefore, that the tern’s small size is no handicap to exploiting the prevailing global wind systems (clockwise in the North, and counter clockwise in the South Atlantic), in a similar way to that of shearwaters (27), and confirms similar suggestions made several decades ago for terns (29). The efficiency of tern flight paths is illustrated by the return

![Fig. 1. Interpolated geolocation tracks of 11 Arctic terns tracked from breeding colonies in Greenland (n = 10 birds) and Iceland (n = 1 bird). Green = autumn (postbreeding) migration (August–November), red = winter range (December–March), and yellow = spring (return) migration (April–May). Two southbound migration routes were adopted in the South Atlantic, either (A) West African coast (n = 7 birds) or (B) Brazilian coast. Dotted lines link locations during the equinoxes.](https://www.pnas.org/pnas/)

Table 1. Phenology of migration stages of Arctic terns from colonies in Greenland (n = 10) and Iceland (n = 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenland birds (n = 10)</th>
<th>Iceland bird (n = 1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival at North Atlantic stopover site</td>
<td>22 Aug (16–27 Aug)</td>
<td>16 Aug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent at North Atlantic stopover site</td>
<td>24.6 Days (10–30 days)</td>
<td>16 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departure from North Atlantic stopover site</td>
<td>15 Sep (5–22 Sep)</td>
<td>1 Sep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival in wintering region</td>
<td>24 Nov (25 Oct–30 Nov)</td>
<td>5 Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent in wintering region</td>
<td>149 Days (139–173 days)</td>
<td>151 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departure from wintering region</td>
<td>16 Apr (12–19 Apr)</td>
<td>3 Apr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date passing Equator on northbound migration</td>
<td>3 May (25 Apr–7 May)</td>
<td>13 Apr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of northbound migration</td>
<td>40 Days (36–46 days)</td>
<td>41 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of southbound migration</td>
<td>93 Days (69–103 days)</td>
<td>80 days</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Arrival and departure dates and durations are given as mean with range in parentheses.*
migration from Antarctica to south Greenland (c. 60° N), an average distance of 24,270 km (range 20,070–27,790 km) covered in only 40 days (range 36–46 days), with average travel distances of 520 km day−1 (range 390–670 km day−1). As birds seem to have been exploiting favorable winds, travel (ground) speed will be higher than air speed. Nevertheless these flight speeds are of the same order as the maximum range speed (9.7 ms−1) calculated from aerodynamics theory, and mean groundspeeds to 838 and 976 km day−1 (range 390–670 km day−1). Thus, the tracked birds were considered to travel nearly twice the total distance generally cited with previous studies. Nevertheless, the tracked birds were likely to be nonbreeders or failed breeders, which are very difficult to capture. In one case (Iceland), the nest of an equipped bird was abandoned after being trapped by domestic sheep before the bird could be trapped.

Our study demonstrated heterogeneity in migration routes within a population, yet clear migratory connectivity between populations. We confirmed that the main wintering region was the marginal ice zone around Antarctica, which agrees with at-sea observations (ref. 18 and references therein). Given that the highest densities of Arctic terns in the Southern Ocean have been observed in the Weddell Sea (17), and that a very high (likely >50%) proportion of the worlds Arctic terns breed in Greenland and Iceland (13), the wintering areas used by our tracked birds may well be typical of the majority of the North Atlantic population. Thus, the long-term changes in duration and extent of winter sea ice, and declines in abundance of Antarctic krill in this region (26, 32) should be viewed with considerable concern.

Material and Methods

We fitted miniature archival light loggers (Mk14 geolocators, mass 1.4 g; British Antarctic Survey), attached to plastic leg rings (mass of logger, ring, tape, and cable tie: 2.0 g, ~1.9% of adult body mass), to 50 breeding Arctic terns in July 2007 at Sand Island (74° 43′ N, 20° 27′ W), Young Sound, Northeast Greenland. An additional 20 geolocators were deployed on Arctic terns at Flatey Island (65° 22′ N, 22° 55′ W), Breiðafjörður, Iceland, in June 2007. The following season, a minimum of 21 birds equipped with loggers (>42%) were observed at Sand Island, but only 10 loggers (20%) were retrieved. At Flatey Island, four birds were resighted (20%), and one (5%) logger was retrieved. All recaptured birds were in good physical condition and no significant difference (t = −1.57, P = 0.133, df = 18, n = 10) could be detected in their body mass between the 2 years (mean ± SD in 2007 and 2008: 106.0 g ± 6.3 and 110.3 ± 6.0, respectively). The average clutch size of breeding pairs in 2008 at Sand Island equipped with loggers was 1.3 (P < 0.43, n = 8), whereas clutch size in control birds the same year was 1.7 (0.48, n = 60). Although poor in power of analysis because of low sample size in the logger group, a one-sided Fisher’s exact test indicated no statistical difference (P = 0.038) between the two groups. Not all birds observed at colonies in 2008 could be recaptured; some birds were clearly breeding, but the nest could not be located or the targeted bird would not enter the trap; others were likely to be nonbreeders or failed breeders, which are very difficult to capture. In one case (Iceland), the nest of an equipped bird was abandoned after being trapped by domestic sheep before the bird could be trapped.

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Table 2. Summary of distances traveled during migration stages of Arctic terns (Greenland and Iceland birds combined, n = 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migration segment</th>
<th>Distance traveled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total distance traveled on migration</td>
<td>70,900 km (59,500–81,600 km)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled on southbound migration</td>
<td>34,600 km (28,000–38,900 km)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled per day on southbound migration</td>
<td>330 km day−1 (280–390 km day−1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled on northbound migration</td>
<td>25,700 km (21,400–34,900 km)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled per day on northbound migration</td>
<td>520 km day−1 (390–670 km day−1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance traveled within winter site</td>
<td>10,900 km (2,700–21,600 km)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


