

Trip Report — Birding the Dakotas: Prairies, Black Hills, & Badlands 2025

May 30-June 6, 2025 with Cory Gregory



This new trip stops at one of the most recognizable views in the US, Mount Rushmore. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

There is a wide swath in the middle part of the United States that often gets overlooked. It's often not a destination, people just pass through, and very few people go there specifically for birding. However, take a closer look and you'd start to realize something... the birding can be downright superb. For example, the northern prairies are integral for nesting waterbirds which are seen in seemingly every single pond and wetland. In fact, we saw hundreds, if not thousands of breeding ducks during our trip! Additionally, a variety of hard-to-see sparrows can sometimes be seen in the vast, grassy marshes. I'm happy to say that for us, they were hardly shy or difficult! The normally-shy LeConte's and Nelson's sparrows came out to play in great

fashion and they sure are stunners when seen well. We paired our visit to the historic Theodore Roosevelt National Park, complete with hundreds of Bison, all the way south to the Black Hills in South Dakota. The vast landscapes and impressive scenery in the Black Hills might have come as a surprise to many of you. Those are hardly hills! Besides, the birds are all completely different. We had American Dippers and Red-naped Sapsuckers right next to our beautiful canyon lodge while White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows swirled overhead. And finally, we closed out our trip with a visit to another National Park. The Badlands! Vast, intimidating, and with a rich geology out in plain view, it was a great way to cap off our trip. My goal in creating this new tour was to provide an in-depth look at the birds of North and South Dakota, take in the scenery, and to visit some American landmarks. In this, we succeeded!



The trip was a fantastic one for seeing some difficult sparrows including LeConte's Sparrow. Here's one that was photographed nicely by participant Dan Blower.

The first chapter in this saga was our visit to the Prairie Potholes east of Bismarck. We spent a day exploring many marshes and wetlands, and we came away with an impressive number of target species as a result. The sparrow show was incredible (LeConte's and Nelson's sparrows point blank), as was spending time with breeding plumaged shorebirds (White-rumped Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalaropes, Marbled Godwit, and others). The expansive marshes there were alive with Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Black Terns, and an impressive variety of waterfowl. American White Pelicans soared overhead, Franklin's Gulls swirled out over the lakes, and grebes were especially well-represented here with sightings of five different species including Red-necked and Clark's. Towards the end of our visit to the Prairie Potholes, we also swung down south of Bismarck and ticked a few local breeding species in the river system there, the highlights being the local Least Tern and Piping Plover. All of this and it was just our first day of birding!



The Red-naped Sapsucker was a common species for us once we arrived in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

Western North Dakota is a vast landscape filled with dry grasslands, riparian areas, isolated buttes, canyons, and badlands. And true to that nature, the variety of birds here was completely different from the ones we experienced in the potholes region. For example, Theodore Roosevelt National Park was alive with Western and Eastern kingbirds, Horned Larks, Lark Sparrows, Black-billed Magpies, a few Long-billed Curlews, Mountain Bluebirds, Lazuli Bunting, and some Yellow-breasted Chats. The huge American Bison, a keystone species, was of great interest as were the Black-tailed Prairie Dogs that dotted the dry grasslands. We enjoyed a lovely picnic lunch in the park and thankfully no bison were keen to join us. The landscape here was vast and the skies endless.

As we turned our attention southward, we explored a few more prairies in western North Dakota. Although it was breezy and quite chilly, we were successful in finding gobs of singing Chestnut-collared Longspurs including some landing right in the road! Nearby, the bold black-and-white Lark Buntings were dotting the fences, Bobolinks were doing their flight displays, and a lone Sharp-tailed Grouse was sitting tight. But one target bird stood out. Not because it was flashy and colorful, but because it's a secretive one and is difficult to observe. Yes, we got great views of the infamous Baird's Sparrow. Whew.



The prairies in western North Dakota actually had a lot of color in them. One such example was the gorgeous Chestnut-collared Longspur that was, at times, abundant. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

One of the most isolated mountain ranges in the US are the Black Hills of South Dakota. Although it's not a major mountain range that gets a lot of attention, the Black Hills are gorgeous and their isolation makes them an interesting place to go birding. For example, there is a fully isolated population of American Dippers in the Black Hills and the next nearest breeding is well into Wyoming to the west. The Black Hills really do provide a western taste and we sampled it daily by seeing Western Tanager, Dusky and Western flycatchers, and Violet-green Swallows. Our impressive mountain lodge, which was a beautiful setting, was also good for birding. Red-naped Sapsuckers were common, MacGillivray's Warblers sang from thickets nearby, and American Dippers bobbed along streamsides. The songscape was lovely on the crisp mornings; filled with the mimicry of Gray Catbirds, the ethereal song of Veeries, and the soft warble of Black-headed Grosbeaks. It was hard leaving Spearfish Canyon.



The Black Hills in South Dakota have American Dippers which, given how remote the mountains are, is kind of miraculous. We saw several including this one photographed by participant Dan Blower.

A unique destination of this trip was the famous Mt. Rushmore which is nestled in the Black Hills. Although our visit there coincided with some rain, this helped keep the crowds down and in fact, we enjoyed the entire place to ourselves for a bit. We had ample time to read up on this monument, visit the museum, watch the video, and even step into the gift shop. Never before had a Field Guides trip visited this iconic vista but we were there, we saw, and we'll all have memories and photos to back it up. Yes, there were birds around as well! Although the dampness of the day kept things fairly quiet, we did stop at a rock face and saw a Canyon Wren bobbing and working its way down towards us. The song of this western species is instantly recognizable, even through the fog and rain.



The Baird's Sparrow might very well be the hardest sparrow in the USA to see well. For us, we achieved this nicely in western North Dakota. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

We closed out our quick trip together with a visit to another well-known National Park. The Badlands. This imposing landscape, full of dry buttes and canyons, stretched out towards the horizon. Nearby, Rock Wrens bobbed up and down and worked their way across rocky stretches. As the rain fell, Western Meadowlarks gave us their farewell songs and an Upland Sandpiper continued its search for food. Impressive numbers of Ring-necked Pheasants lined the highways (we ended that day with 90+!) and we added a last-minute Dickcissel, Brown Thrasher, and Common Nighthawk, all before wrapping up the trip back in Bismarck.



Our tour stays in the Spearfish Canyon Lodge nestled up in the Black Hills. Surrounded by rushing streams and beautiful vistas, it was a gorgeous place to call home for multiple nights. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

Here's a list of the mammals we encountered:

White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendi*) - A pair of these flushed from grasslands in ND.

Least Chipmunk (*Neotamias minimus*) - Fairly common in the Black Hills.

Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*) - Seen in the Black Hills, thankfully not called woodchuck.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) - Countless on many occasions!

Coyote (*Canis latrans*) - One was spotted in a prairie-dog town.

Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) - Remember the stotting!

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) - Numerous

Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) - Remember, these aren't actually antelope, these are way cooler.

American Bison (*Bos bison*) - Not a buffalo, and not even closely related to true buffalo in Africa/Asia.



The extensive marshes we visited were dominated by this big, bold, and flashy species, the Yellow-headed Blackbird. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

In closing, I sincerely hope you all came away with some great memories and have come to appreciate the northern prairies and the fantastic birding that can be found. From the bird-rich prairie potholes to the windy and chilly day we had to find the Baird's, to the surprisingly big and impressive Black Hills, we saw an impressive diversity of species and a multitude of vistas. A big thank you to all of you for joining me on this adventure and also thanks to Nicole for handling so much of the work and preparation. Be safe and I hope to see you again on another adventure.

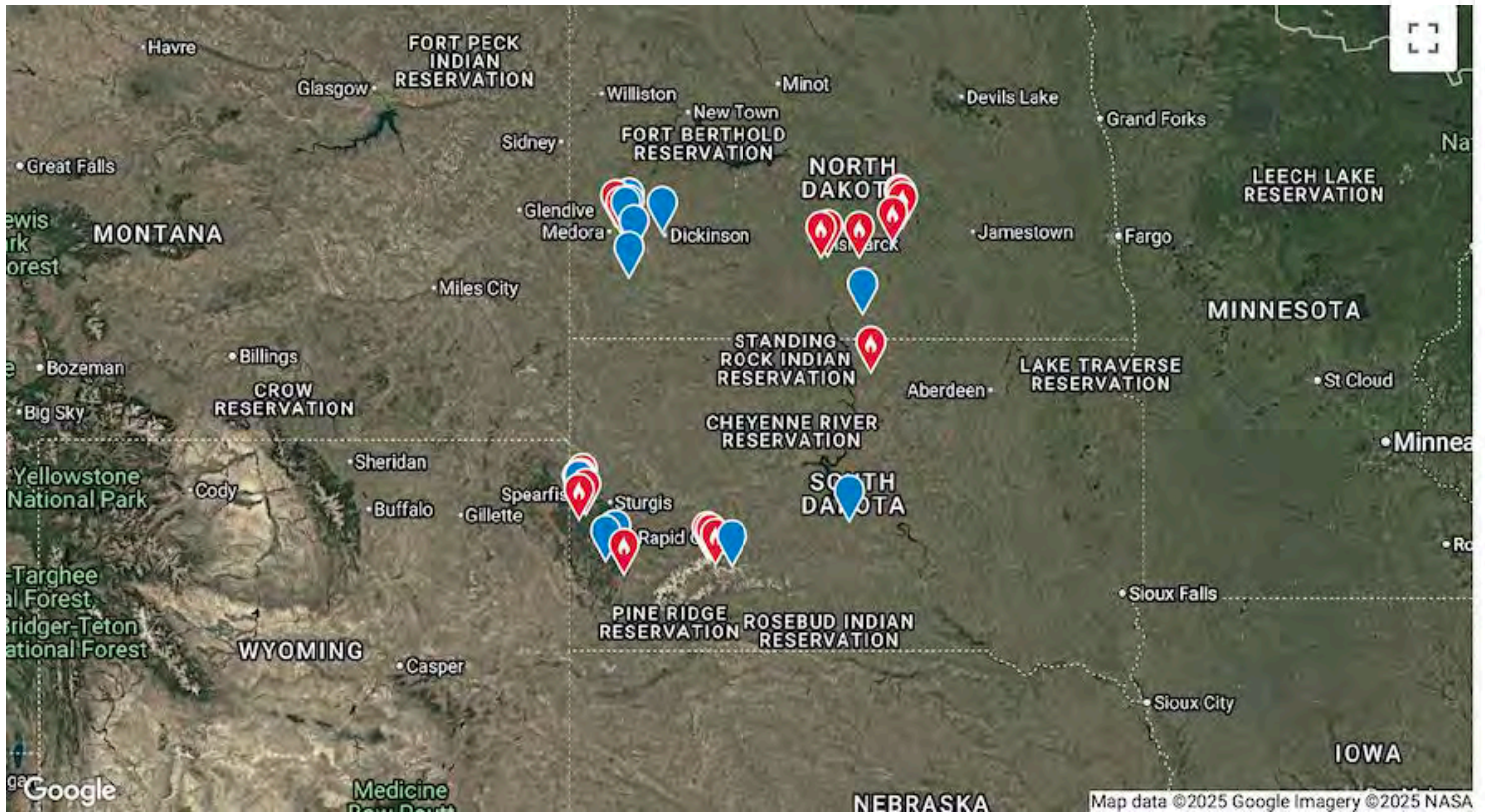
You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/383369>

-- Cory Gregory (Curlew)

Field Guides Birding Tours -- DAKOTAS, 2025 (with Cory Gregory)

30 May – 6 Jun 2025 (8 days) Link-only



📍 United States

North Dakota | South Dakota Subregions

👤 Cory Gregory





For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional media for this trip...

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[Species Observed](#)[Checklists](#)[Species with Photos](#)



























Species Observed



























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3	Snow Goose	<i>Anser caerulescens</i>	▶  1
47	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	▶  7
2	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>	▶  1
39	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>	▶  6
20	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	▶  3
9	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	▶  3
1	American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	▶  1
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	▶  4
3	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	▶  1
2	Canvasback	<i>Aythya valisineria</i>	▶  1
1	Redhead	<i>Aythya americana</i>	▶  1
15	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	▶  2
1	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	▶  1
30	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	▶  3
3	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i> *	▶  1
1	Sharp-tailed Grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>	▶  1
2	Gray Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i> *	▶  1
50	Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i> *	▶  4
3	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> *	▶  1
1	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> *	▶  1
8	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	▶  5
1	Common Nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles minor</i>	▶  1





















2	Chimney Swift	<i>Chaetura pelagica</i>	▶  1
10	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>	▶  2
1	Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>	▶  1
3	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	▶  2
2	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	▶  1
5	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	▶  2
13	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	▶  5
1	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	▶  1
2	Piping Plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	▶  1
7	Upland Sandpiper	<i>Bartramia longicauda</i>	▶  4
5	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	▶  2
7	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	▶  3
5	Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	▶  2
16	Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	▶  1  3
1	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	▶  1
3	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▶  1
8	Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>	▶  1
1	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	▶  1
12	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	▶  2  2
13	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>	▶  1
8	Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>	▶  2
8	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	▶  2
4	Least Tern	<i>Sternula antillarum</i>	▶  1
1	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	▶  1

20	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	▶  1  5
4	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	▶  2  3
1	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	▶  1
2	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	▶  1
13	Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	▶  3
33	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	▶  4
2	Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>	▶  1  2
54	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	▶  3
13	White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>	▶  2
1	American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	▶  1
1	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	▶  1
8	Western Cattle-Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>	▶  1
1	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	▶  1
10	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	▶  3
72	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>	▶  1  4
31	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	▶  8
1	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	▶  1
1	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	▶  1
2	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Astur cooperii</i>	▶  2
1	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	▶  1
4	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	▶  3
3	Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>	▶  3
1	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	▶  1

1	Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>	▶  1
1	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megasceryle alcyon</i>	▶  1
4	Red-naped Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>	▶  2  3
3	Lewis's Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>	▶  1
4	Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>	▶  1
1	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	▶  1
2	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates villosus</i>	▶  2
6	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	▶  2  4
3	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	▶  2
3	Western Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus</i>	▶  3
3	Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>	▶  2
1	Dusky Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax oberholseri</i>	▶  1
2	Western Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax difficilis</i>	▶  2
11	Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>	▶  4
17	Eastern Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus tyrannus</i>	▶  6
7	Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo gilvus</i>	▶  1  4
9	Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	▶  4
1	Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	▶  1
1	Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	▶  1
13	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	▶  2
3	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	▶  3
8	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	▶  6
19	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	▶  4

5	Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	▶  1
2	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	▶  1
4	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>	▶  1
7	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	▶  4
11	Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>	▶  2
6	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Corthylio calendula</i>	▶  3
10	Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	▶  1  5
1	Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>	▶  1
2	Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>	▶  2
1	Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	▶  1
3	Sedge Wren	<i>Cistothorus stellaris</i>	▶  1
8	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	▶  2
3	American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	▶  3  3
4	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> *	▶  2
11	Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	▶  1  6
1	Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	▶  1
1	Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>	▶  1
7	Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>	▶  2
1	Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>	▶  1
2	Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	▶  1
2	Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	▶  2
31	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	▶  12
52	Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	▶  4

2	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	*	▶  1
6	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		▶  2
14	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>		▶  4
5	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>		▶  4
12	Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>		▶  2  2
11	Grasshopper Sparrow	<i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>		▶  1  3
12	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>		▶  5
2	Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>		▶  2
9	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>		▶  2
18	Lark Bunting	<i>Calamospiza melanocorys</i>		▶  2  4
3	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>		▶  3
6	Vesper Sparrow	<i>Pooecetes gramineus</i>		▶  3
2	LeConte's Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza leconteii</i>		▶  5  1
3	Nelson's Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza nelsoni</i>		▶  5  1
7	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>		▶  4
2	Baird's Sparrow	<i>Centronyx bairdii</i>		▶  1  1
13	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		▶  10
3	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>		▶  2
1	Yellow-breasted Chat	<i>Icteria virens</i>		▶  1
37	Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>		▶  1  4
16	Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>		▶  4
48	Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>		▶  12
4	Orchard Oriole	<i>Icterus spurius</i>		▶  2

38	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	▶  10
36	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	▶  10
22	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	▶  1  4
30	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	▶  9
2	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>	▶  2
1	Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	▶  1
2	MacGillivray's Warbler	<i>Geothlypis tolmiei</i>	▶  3  2
3	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	▶  3
14	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	▶  5  4
10	Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>	▶  5
4	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>	▶  2
1	Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>	▶  1
10	Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>	▶  2  5
1	Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>	▶  1
1	Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>	▶  1
3	Dickcissel	<i>Spiza americana</i>	▶  1

ADDITIONAL TAXA

5	Larus sp.	<i>Larus sp.</i>	▶  1
1	Forster's/Common Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri/hirundo</i>	▶  1