

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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GULL-BILLED TERN

*Gelochelidon nilotica*

Family: LARIDAE  
B226

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Formerly a fairly common summer resident at the Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Breeders were detected first on low, sandy islets at the south end of the sea in 1927, where it was believed they had been coming for at least several years (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Numbers of breeders have declined from early estimates of 500 pairs, as rising water levels have flooded nesting islands (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Presently, the largest breeding colonies are at the southeast corner of the sea and to the south of Salton City. Another breeding population has become established in San Diego county in the estuaries close to the Mexican border. Arrives in mid-March, and mostly departs by early September (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Forages over many habitats including fresh and saline emergent wetlands, lakes, mudflats, croplands, grasslands, and, rarely, brushlands (Rohwer and Woolfenden 1968). Feeds by dipping down to seize preferred insect prey from surfaces, or catches them in midair. Occasionally plunges into water after fish from shallow flight (Harrison 1983). Opportunistic feeder; reportedly eats grasshoppers, beetles, spiders, earthworms, fish, frogs, lizards, small mammals, eggs, and young of other birds (Rohwer and Woolfenden 1968).

**Cover:** No additional data found.

**Reproduction:** In California, nests only at the Salton Sea, but breeding range in North America includes the Gulf of California, Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic Coast north to New York (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). At the Salton Sea, nests on sandy flats amidst shells and debris (Cogswell 1977). Pair nests singly, or in dense, scattered groups at the edge of colonies of other terns (Terres 1980). Nests are shallow depressions in soft sand, soil, or dry mud, usually lined with grasses, seaweed, or other vegetation (Harrison 1978). In other portions of the range, has been observed nesting near lakes, rivers, salt and freshwater marshes (Pough 1951).

**Water:** No additional data found.

**Pattern:** Prefers sandy beaches for nesting, and forages over shallow waters, mudflats, grasslands, and croplands (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity. It is a swift flier, but slightly heavier and steadier than other terns (Bent 1921). In its daily habits, much like the dark-headed gulls (Pough 1951).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: A summer visitor to the Salton Sea. Arrives in mid-March, and usually departs by early September (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In the Gulf of Mexico, migrates a few hundred yards offshore, occasionally feeding over land. Usually migrates in pairs or small groups (Bent 1921).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: No data found.

Reproduction: Nesting begins in early May. Pair is single-brooded. Clutch usually has 3 eggs; range 2-5, larger numbers probably laid by 2 females. Incubation lasts 22-23 days; male and female share this duty. Nestlings are semiprecocial; tended by both parents. They can fly well at about 5 wk (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Nearly exterminated in early 1900s from egg collecting and hunting for the millinery trade. The species has never recovered (Bent 1921). Numbers at the Salton Sea have declined from flooding of nest sites by rising water levels (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In eastern breeding grounds, it associates commonly with common tern, Forster's tern, laughing gull, and black skimmer (Bent 1921).

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