

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

ELEGANT TERN

Thalasseus elegans

Family: LARIDAE
B229

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Formerly a rare and irregular post-nesting visitor to coastal California (Grinnell and Miller 1944). During the 1950s, numbers increased, and large flocks now can be seen in most years off the southern coast (Cogswell 1977). Although also occurs in northern California, rare north of Marin Co. (McCaskie et al. 1979). Begins to arrive in southern coastal areas from breeding grounds in Mexico in June. Becomes common by July, and most have departed by October (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Preferred habitats are inshore coastal waters, bays, estuaries, and harbors; rarely occurs far offshore, and never inland (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Although breeds primarily in Mexico, a nesting colony was established at San Diego Bay in 1959 (Cogswell 1977). This colony has persisted in the years following, and may have facilitated the recent range extension of nonbreeders northward to the coast of central California (Cogswell 1977).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Primarily feeds in shallow ocean waters beyond the turbulent breaker zone, but also may forage in protected bays and lagoons (Cogswell 1977). Dives into water for fish, the primary prey (Terres 1980).

Cover: Congregates on beaches and tideflats when not feeding. If members of its own species are present, usually does not mingle with other terns (Cogswell 1977). Tends to roost high up on beaches (Terres 1980).

Reproduction: While breeding, confined to Mexico and extreme southern California (Harrison 1983). The colony of 200 pairs at the south end of San Diego Bay is the only one in the U.S. (Garrett and Dunn 1981). There it nests on dikes between salt ponds in association with Caspian tern (Cogswell 1977). Elsewhere, nests in colonies on undisturbed island beaches (Dawson 1923). Nest is a shallow scrape in sand about 18 m (20 yd) from the surfline (Bent 1921).

Water: Apparently does not need to visit fresh water.

Pattern: There is a small nesting colony in San Diego Bay. Post-breeders frequent seacoasts, mudflats, bays, estuaries, and lagoons (American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity. Forages actively in light, graceful flight (Dawson 1923). Roosts on sandy beaches or tideflats (Cogswell 1977).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Breeds from San Diego Bay south to central Baja California. Post-breeders in summer occur regularly on the Pacific Coast from central

California to Costa Rica. In Winter, frequents the coasts of Central and South America (American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: No data found.

Reproduction: Breeders at the San Diego Bay colony arrive in California in March, much earlier than post-nesting visitors (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In Mexico, clutch size was 1; rarely 2. Most eggs apparently laid in April (Bent 1921). Incubation period probably about 20 days, as in other similar-sized terns. Age at first flight is unknown (Terres 1980).

Niche: Tropical storms may devastate entire colonies on low-lying Mexican islands (Dawson 1923). The nesting colony on San Diego Bay is in the midst of breeding Caspian terns (Cogswell 1977). Because of its recent range extension into the U.S., the breeding biology and other habits of this species in California are poorly known (Bent 1921, Terres 1980). Chicks form creches (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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