

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

COMMON TERN

Sterna hirundo

Family: LARIDAE
B231

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Migrates along the coast of California in spring and autumn. Can be numerous at times (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Probably occurs the length of the state, but most records are from San Francisco Bay southward (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Spring migrants arrive in April, but the highest numbers have been noted from mid-August through mid-October when individuals move southward. Stragglers may remain in northern California until December (McCaskie et al. 1979). Mostly observed on inshore ocean waters, but also frequents coastal estuaries, lagoons, and tidal flats (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In southern California, regular spring and autumn migrant on coast. Also numerous at the Salton Sea, and locally along the Colorado River (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Because of the similarity of this species to the arctic tern and Forster's tern, its status in the state is uncertain (Cogswell 1977).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Forages in many habitats, including open waters, beach inlets, tidal creeks, and emergent wetlands (Erwin 1977b). Feeds principally on fish, taken by diving after hovering flight. Preferred prey are sand lances, pipefish, menhaden, alewives, and occasionally crustaceans or insects (Terres 1980). Male engages in courtship feeding, and brings food to incubating mate (Nisbet 1973). Food quality and quantity ingested by the female were important determinants of egg size and fledging success (Nisbet 1978).

Cover: Roosts on open water, beaches, bayside pilings, and tide flats, often in association with other terns or gulls (Cogswell 1977).

Reproduction: Breeds coastally, or near large interior lakes (Harrison 1978), from northwestern Canada south to eastern Washington, and across the northern U.S. to the Great Lakes and Atlantic Ocean. Also breeds in northern Eurasia (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Colonies of hundreds, or thousands (Terres 1980), nest on beaches, sand dunes, islands in freshwater, and coastal marshes (Burger and Lesser 1978). Nests are built in windrows of seaweed, eelgrass, and other decaying vegetation (Bent 1921). Prefers to nest in areas dominated by vegetation 50-80 cm (20-32 in) high to protect young from predators and inclement weather (Langham 1974). Nest site is a slight depression formed by female in sand or soil, usually lined by grasses, seaweed, or broken sea shells (Terres 1980).

Water: Depends more on fresh water for drinking than does arctic tern (Hawksley 1957).

Pattern: In migration, occurs principally over coastal waters, but also frequents bays, estuaries, tide flats, inland lakes, and rivers (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity. Actively forages by day in the manner of arctic tern, Forster's tern, and other similar-sized terns. Noted for its especially buoyant and graceful flight (Bent 1921).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Arrives on breeding ground in North America and Eurasia in April or May and migrates to wintering areas in South America, Africa, and elsewhere in autumn. A few may overwinter in the San Diego area (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: On the Farne Islands, England, nest densities ranged from 0.06 to 0.13/m² (0.05-0.11/yard²).

Reproduction: Begins to nest in early May (Burger and Lesser 1978). Single-brooded; clutch usually contains 2-3 eggs, rarely 4 (Harrison 1978). Both sexes incubate, but female predominates (Erwin 1977b). Incubation usually begins with the first egg laid, and lasts 20-23 days (Harrison 1978). Young are semiprecocial and tended by both parents. Young swim at an early age, and begin flying at about 28 days (Harrison 1978). In New York, 6-7 yr-old individuals had larger clutches and higher nesting success than younger breeders (Hays 1978).

Niche: This species was heavily exploited for the millinery trade during the 19th century, but has recovered with strict protection (Bent 1921).

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