



Roseate Tern

Sterna dougallii

Order CHARADRIIFORMES – Family LARIDAE

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Authors: Gochfeld, Michael, Joanna Burger, and Ian C. Nisbet

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Introduction

The Roseate Tern is a pale, medium-sized, black-capped tern with a wide distribution in tropical seas, but it is local and usually uncommon over most of its range. Its dashing flight with rapid wing-beats, swooping dives, and rosy bloom in spring breeding plumage are pleasures encountered on many coasts and offshore islands worldwide. A. C. Bent ([1921](#): 256) wrote of his first specimen: "I shall never forget the thrill of pleasure I experienced when I held in my hand, for the first time a Roseate Tern and admired with deepest reverence the delicate refinement of one of nature's loveliest productions."

This tern is a specialized plunge-diver, feeding on small, schooling marine fish. It usually forages over reefs, sandbars, or tide rips, or in association with predatory fish that force smaller fish to the surface. Adapted for fast flight and relatively deep diving, the Roseate Tern often submerges completely when diving for fish. Its aerial courtship flights are among the most spectacular of any



Juvenile Roseate Tern; NY State, August

seabird.

The Roseate Tern has a scattered distribution in the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, including Australasia. Although it is primarily tropical, Atlantic populations extend well into the temperate zone in North America and Europe. This species nests mainly on small islands, with only a few large colonies in any region. In North America it breeds in two discrete areas: from Nova Scotia to New York (hereafter referred to as the northeastern population) and around the Caribbean Sea (including the Florida Keys). Although found in early winter in n. South America, and later in small numbers along the Brazilian coast, the major wintering area remains a mystery. In 1996, however, Hays et al. (1997), found large numbers on the coast of Bahia, Brazil.

The Canadian Wildlife Service lists this species as Threatened. The U.S. Department of Interior lists the northeastern population as Endangered and the Caribbean population as Threatened, and the global status of the Roseate Tern is considered “near Threatened.”

Northeastern and European individuals almost always breed in colonies with Common (*Sterna hirundo*) or Arctic (*S. paradisaea*) terns. Like those of other terns, Roseate Tern colonies have suffered encroachment from expanding gull populations (Drury 1973–1974), and terns have had to move to suboptimal sites (Nisbet 1981a). In most colonies, Roseate Terns nest under cover such as dense vegetation, rocks, driftwood, or artificial structures, and they readily adapt to nesting in tires or wooden boxes, allowing them to keep their eggs and chicks well hidden. At a few North American and many Caribbean colonies, this species nests much more in the open. In Florida, it nests with Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*; Smith 1995), and elsewhere in the Caribbean generally with Bridled (*S. anaethetus*), Sooty (*S. fuscata*), and/or Sandwich (*S. sandvicensis*) terns. The total breeding population in eastern North America is currently (1995) about 3,500 pairs (Spendelov et al. 1995; see Appendix 1). The Caribbean population is difficult to estimate because of the many small, undocumented colonies, particularly in the Bahamas, but population surveys account for about 4,000 pairs (Gochfeld et al. 1994), with a probable maximum of 5,500–8,500 pairs (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 1993).

Roseate Terns are susceptible to human disturbance, although their habit of nesting in protected sites under vegetation or other objects makes them less vulnerable than Common Terns that nest in the open. Once heavily collected for the plume trade, and



Adult Roseate Tern, Ram Island, Buzzards Bay, MA. May.



Figure 1. Breeding range of the Roseate Tern in Canada and the ne. USA.

vulnerable to eggging, their numbers increased following the protection of colonies in North America. Breeding colonies in the Caribbean are still vulnerable to eggers, who preferentially seek the eggs of this species because of imputed aphrodisiac properties. In morphology, voice, and behavior, Roseate Terns combine characteristics of the typical sea terns (e.g., the Common Tern) and the crested terns (e.g., the Sandwich Tern).

Most published information on the Roseate Tern in North America comes from 4 colonies that are the original focus of a Metapopulation Study (1987 to date; see top 4 colonies in [Table 1](#)) and that harbor the majority of the northeastern population ([Spendelov et al. 1995](#)). Information on the Caribbean population comes mostly from Culebra (J. Saliva pers. comm., JB, MG) and islands off La Parguera, sw. Puerto Rico (D. Shealer pers. comm.).

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