

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

The Common Tern is distributed worldwide and in North America breeds along the East Coast, across Canada from Newfoundland inland to central Mackenzie, and south to Montana, South Dakota, Ohio, and New York. A population decline has been noted since the 1930s throughout the species' North American range, and has been particularly severe in the Great Lakes (Morris et al. 1980) and in Massachusetts (Nisbet 1973). The eastern U.S. population, occurring from the Great Lakes, Gulf of St. Lawrence, and northern Atlantic Coast south to Virginia, is estimated at 70,000 to 75,000 pairs (Kress et al. 1983). Chlorinated hydrocarbons and mercury (Hays and Risebrough 1972), competition with gulls for nesting sites (Nisbet 1973; Morris et al. 1980; Kress et al. 1983), loss of suitable nest sites, predation, and human disturbance all seem to have contributed to the decline. In the East, the species winters along coasts from the southern edge of the breeding range in South Carolina south to South America. Common Terns arrive in Vermont during the first week in May and usually depart by the end of September.

Vermont's first documented record for the species dates from 1892, at the height of the Common Tern's decimation for the millinery trade, when the few remaining colonies on the East Coast had to be protected by paid keepers (Chapman 1904). While no earlier mention of terns in Vermont exists, the Vermont population is believed to have established itself on Popasquash Island (Lake Champlain) near St. Albans in the late 1800s (J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.). Estimates of the size of that colony have existed since 1947, when the number of adults was put at 100 (RNEB 1947); more recent estimates have ranged from 500 adults and 260 nests in 1968 (Miller and King 1981) to 50 adults and 30 nests in 1980 (S. B. Laughlin, pers. comm.). Since their arrival in the 1940s Ring-billed Gulls have occupied more and

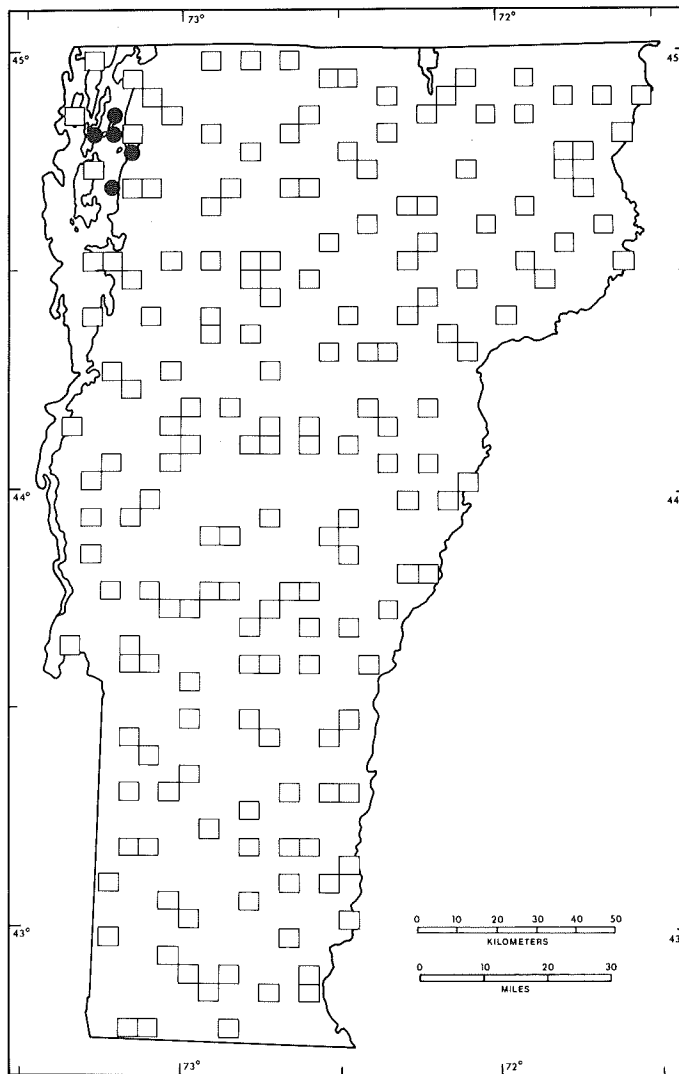


more of the interior of the island, leaving the terns to nest on the edges.

Common Terns vary the location of their main Vermont colony from year to year, utilizing three other small (0.1 ha [0.3–0.5 a]), shaley islands—Rock, Gramma (or No-Name), and Hen; a rock ledge exposed only in years of low water (about 100 adults incubated eggs on bare rock there in 1980); and spits of land on larger islands (Laughlin 1983). The rock ledge has produced the highest nesting success in recent years. The Vermont Institute of Natural Science annual tern censuses have produced the following data (Laughlin 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983):

	1980	1981	1983
adult birds at nesting islands	275	286	196
nests	121	178	111
young located	21	0	21
fledglings	0	0	10

Spear (1970) postulated that the low nesting success of Common Terns on Lake Champlain was a result of heavy boating traffic around and human disturbance on the nesting islands, which kept the terns off their eggs long enough for the eggs to become inviable. Predation by Black-crowned Night-Herons and Great Horned Owls has been documented at other tern colonies (Nisbet 1984), raising the possibility that nighttime



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 0 (0%)

Possible breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	0	0	0
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

intrusions may have kept incubating adult terns off their eggs until daytime, with the same results. Vermont egg dates range from May 14 to July 7 (later dates are of inviable eggs); clutches contain from 1 to 4 eggs, and average 3.

A Common Tern research program to determine the exact causes of nest failure and to introduce means to reverse the trend is planned by the Vermont Institute of Natural Science and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. In recent years nesting success has been low enough to warrant proposing the species for the state Threatened Species List.

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