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## Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*

The Gull-billed Tern is one of the most cosmopolitan birds in the world. However, nesting colonies are sparse, and many areas that appear to be suitable for nesting are unoccupied. In the Western Hemisphere, this species breeds from southern California south to Ecuador and in disjunct locations from Long Island south to Argentina.

**Habitat.** Gull-billed Terns typically breed on sandy islands where they are protected from terrestrial predators. The nest is a shallow depression on a low mound, heavily lined with pebbles, bits of shell, and grass stems.

Unlike most terns, Gull-billed Terns seldom dive for fish. More often they feed on insects, crabs, crayfish, and other invertebrates captured on land or in the water. They also prey on small animals, such as lizards and frogs and will even take small rodents or snatch eggs and chicks from the nests of neighboring birds.

A typical clutch consists of 3 eggs, pinkish-buff and mottled with shades of brown. Incubation takes 22 to 23 days, and the young fly about 30 days after hatching (Ehrlich et al. 1988).



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**Seasonal Occurrence.** Egg dates range from 3 May through 10 July. Spring arrivals have been noted in March and April, fall migrants in September through November.

**Status.** In Florida the Gull-billed Tern breeds along both coasts and in very few locations in the interior of the state. Except in Palm Beach County, Gull-billed Terns do not breed in south Florida, apparently because of unsuitable breeding habitats.

Confirmation of breeding in only 10 quadrangles proves that the Gull-billed Tern is a rare and highly localized breeder in Florida. It is less dependent on fish than are most terns; hence, it is more likely to breed in the interior, where it feeds on insects, aquatic organisms, frogs, small reptiles (especially anoles) (Rohwer and Woolfenden 1968), and even small mammals. Nesting Gull-billed Terns were first recorded in Florida in 1932 (Sprunt 1954). They formerly nested on the Panhandle coast, in Pinellas County, and around Lake Okeechobee. During the Atlas survey, the species nested on islands off Franklin and Duval counties, the phosphate mines of Polk and Hillsborough counties, the eastern portion of Tampa Bay, Cape Canaveral, and the agricultural fields of Palm Beach County.

Many colonies in Florida are small and change location annually, therefore, a few small sites in the interior may have escaped detection. However, it is unlikely that any coastal locations were missed during the Atlas project.

In 1974 the colony at Little Bird Island in Duval County contained 325 nests, which was large by Florida standards. In the late 1970s the island washed away, and Gull-billed Terns disappeared as a breeder from northeast Florida. In the 1980s the islands began to build up again, and the birds returned. The species is slowly increasing its numbers at this important colony, but it is far from its former abundance.

Robert W. Loftin

# Gull-billed Tern

