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Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*

The Royal Tern is almost entirely restricted to salt water, where it frequents harbors, estuaries, sandy beaches, and nearshore waters on the coast. However, it is now being seen more frequently, especially in winter, over inland lakes and at phosphate mines in Florida. Royal Terns breed on the North American coasts from southern California and Maryland south to northern South America.

Habitat. Royal Terns breed at great densities, therefore, a large Royal Tern colony is highly conspicuous. However, colonies are not always large, so it is possible that 1 or 2 small pioneering colonies might be overlooked. In Florida 90% of Royal Tern nests contain only 1 egg (R. Loftin, unpubl. data), which is incubated for 20 to 22 days. The young form a creche (flock) on the beach, where they are fed by adults who recognize their offspring by voice. The chicks fly 28 to 35 days after hatching (Harrison 1978).

Food is primarily fish and shrimp (Howell 1932).

Seasonal Occurrence. Royal Terns occur along the full coast of Florida; occasionally they are found inland around large lakes, September through April. Egg sets have been collected April through July.

Status. Status. No record of breeding away from the coast yet exists. The scarcity of undisturbed nesting and resting sites along the coast justifies the Royal Tern's listing as a Species of Special Concern (Barbour 1978a).

Royal Terns bred on the Gulf coast until the late nineteenth century, when all colonies disappeared (Howell 1932). Not until 1951, when 1 nest was found near Port St. Joe in Gulf County, did the Royal Tern return as a breeder (Hallman 1952). A colony established in 1968 on Bird Island in Duval County contained 1,000 nests 2 years later (Ogden 1970). In 1974 2,100 Royal Tern nests were discovered on nearby Little Bird Island (Ogden 1974b). In 1973 a colony of 2,000 pairs was established on dredged-material islands at Merritt Island (Ogden 1974b), and by 1975 the species was breeding in Charlotte County (Schreiber and Schreiber 1976) and Citrus County (Barbour et al. 1976).

The colony site at Port St. Joe no longer exists. In Duval County, Bird Island washed away in the late 1970s but reappeared in the 1980s. This colony has reestablished itself and has returned to its former numbers. In 1986 1,035 pairs nested on 2 islands in the Banana River in Brevard County, 600 pairs at Passage Key at the mouth Tampa Bay, 450 pairs on Island 3D in Tampa Bay, and 2 pairs on a rooftop in Vero Beach (Paul 1986, Toland and Gilbert 1987). The colony near Yankeetown contained 50 pairs in 1987 (Paul 1987). In 1989 the Passage Key colony had increased to 1,825 pairs, and the Bird Islands of Duval County contained an estimated 2,250 pairs (Paul 1989). By 1990 2,500 Royal Tern pairs were nesting on Passage Key (Paul 1991).

The breeding record from Vero Beach in Indian River County was the first known instance of this species nesting on a rooftop and represented the southernmost nesting on the Atlantic coast (Toland and Gilbert 1987). With the loss of suitable natural habitats, beach-nesting species are increasingly using human-made habitats, such as dredged-material islands and phosphate mines. Some of the more adaptable species are using gravel rooftops, with mixed results. The Royal Tern breeding attempt at Vero Beach consisted of only 2 nests, both of which failed to fledge any young.

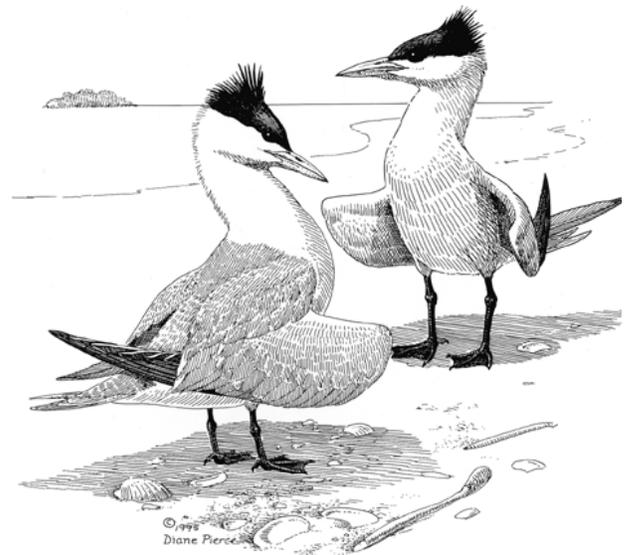


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Royal Tern

