

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*



Folk Name: Red-billed Striker, Mackerel Gull

Status: Migrant

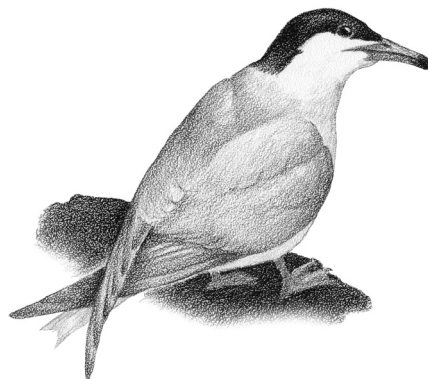
Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Open water, lake edge

The Common Tern is one of our two medium-sized terns. It is just slightly smaller than a Bonaparte's Gull. It is found inland during migration, along rivers, and on large lakes and reservoirs. It is more common in the Carolinas during fall. The Common Tern averages 12 inches while the Forster's Tern averages an inch larger. These two terns can be very similar in appearance, and care should be taken to distinguish between them.

According to C.S. Brimley, the Common Tern was once, like its name suggests, "very common" along the Carolina coast prior to the late 1800s. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, it "was very greatly diminished in numbers by the persecutions of plume hunters." Over 100 years have passed since these and other birds were protected from plume hunting, and still the Common Tern population has not yet fully recovered.

Protection from hunting did aid the gradual expansion of the breeding range of this tern. A nesting colony was discovered on the beaches of North Carolina in the early 1900s, which at that time was the southernmost nest site on the Atlantic Seaboard. From the 1960s through the 1980s, a few nests were found as far south as Bull's Bay in South Carolina. Recent surveys indicate the North Carolina breeding population has declined 60% over the past 35 years. In the 1970s, Post-breeding flocks numbered near 10,000 and now have declined to around 1,500. The modern cause for the decline is not plume hunting, but rather increased predation, human impacts on nesting areas, and loss of suitable breeding grounds. Large numbers of beachgoers visiting the beaches in the summer can disturb the nesting process. The Common Tern and other beach-nesting species are often unable to



successfully raise young in such close proximity to people.

In this region, the Common Tern is usually found from late July through early November, with most being recorded in the month of September. We also have a handful of spring records. During a survey of High Rock Lake in 1948, Larry Crawford counted 12 Common Terns between 26 July and 15 August. Three Common Terns were reported on the Stanly Spring Bird Count in 1971 and one was reported on that count in 1973. Jerry Shiffert reported a dozen on High Rock Lake on September 13, 1975. One was a highlight of the Iredell Spring Bird Count in 1978.

In 1989, Hurricane Hugo forced a large group of Common Terns into the region. Allen Bryan found 135 in Cleveland County near Shelby on September 22, 1989. David Wright sighted 34 on Lake Norman on the same day, and observers tallied at least 40 there the next day. Wright later noted that many of these birds remained present through the 24th.

David Wright found an "exceedingly late" Common Tern on Lake Norman on November 13, 1995. This bird "was closely observed to rule out Forster's." Three years later, he found a flock of 15 there on September 15, 1998, and on July 22, 1999, Dwayne Martin reported two on



Common Tern on Lake Norman. (Chris Talkington)



Common Tern in flight. (Jeff Lemons)

Lake Hickory. Hurricane Floyd deposited an amazing flock of 150 Common Terns on Lookout Shoals Lake on September 15, 1999, providing the highest single count of this tern ever found in the region.

The Common Tern has been found almost annually in the region since the late 1990s. Flocks have been reported on lakes in Alexander, Cabarrus, Catawba, Iredell, Lancaster, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Union, and York counties. Numbers ranged between 1 and 85 birds. Spring reports were few and ranged from 3 April to 29 May. Post-breeding reports ranged from 20 July to 3 November. Over 95% of the birds were reported in the month of September. A count of 85 birds was reported by Dwayne Martin on Lake Hickory on October 10, 2015.

He noted these bird's "dark primaries, black on side of head and wrapping around to the nape."

The breeding population of the Common Tern is listed as a "Species of Special Concern" by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, and it has legal protection status under the auspices of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The state's population is considered "vulnerable to extinction." Commission biologists found only 15 breeding colonies in 2011 with a combined total of about 600 nests, down from almost 3,000 in 1977. Most successful nesting is now on sandy spits and islands well away from inhabited beaches. It is currently under consideration for listing in North Carolina as a State Endangered species.