Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

The Common Tern is one of Vermont's most graceful colonial waterbirds. With its black cap, red bill, and forked tail it artfully maneuvers through the air, plucking fish from just beneath the water's surface. The most widespread of North American terns, the Common Tern nests inland across Canada from the Northwest Territories to Labrador, around the Great Lakes, and in the Northern Tier states from Montana to Maine. Along the Atlantic coast, which supports the largest colonies, the Common Tern nests from Newfoundland to South Carolina, as well as in an isolated colony on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana (Nisbet 2002).

Common Terns nest on islands, beaches, dredge spoils, cement breakwaters, navigation towers, and other isolated locations with sparse vegetation, often in large numbers (Nisbet 2002). The nest is a shallow scrape often lined with bits and pieces of vegetation. In Vermont, Common Terns return in late April to nest on 2 to 6 small islands (less than 0.5 hectares or 1.2 acres) on Lake Champlain, the only area in the state where breeding occurs. In 2007, nests with eggs (N = 280) were found between 11 May and 16 July. LaBarr (unpubl. data) has documented eggs as early as 9 May. Nesting peaks in late May and early June but continues through July as failed pairs attempt to renest. Clutch size ranges from 1 to 4 eggs, but 2 to 3 eggs are most common. Incubation ranges from 21 days to more than 30 depending on the frequency and duration of disturbance. The first chicks are observed in early June with fledging dates ranging from late June to mid-August. In 2007 chicks were documented as having fledged (N = 70) from 20 June to 28 August. The latest documented fledging date was 4 September (M. LaBarr unpubl. data).

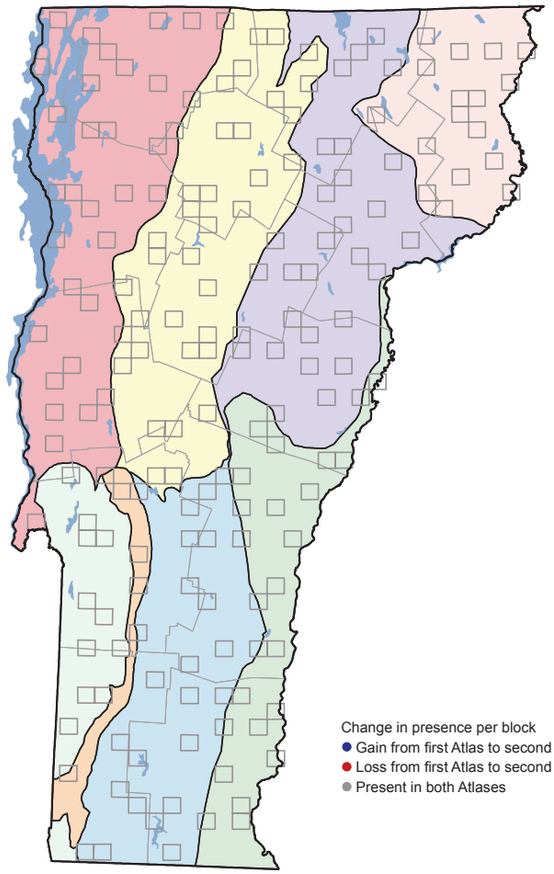
Distribution has changed little since the first atlas. Popasquash Island near Swanton and Rock Island in St. Albans Bay still supported Common Terns, as did Grammas Island in North Hero. Hen, Savage, and Gull Rock islands, which have been sporadically used by small numbers of the species since the first atlas, were not used during the second. Although these islands have not supported terns in recent years, the statewide population has increased and birds remain locally abundant in the northeastern arm of Lake Champlain (M. LaBarr unpubl. data).

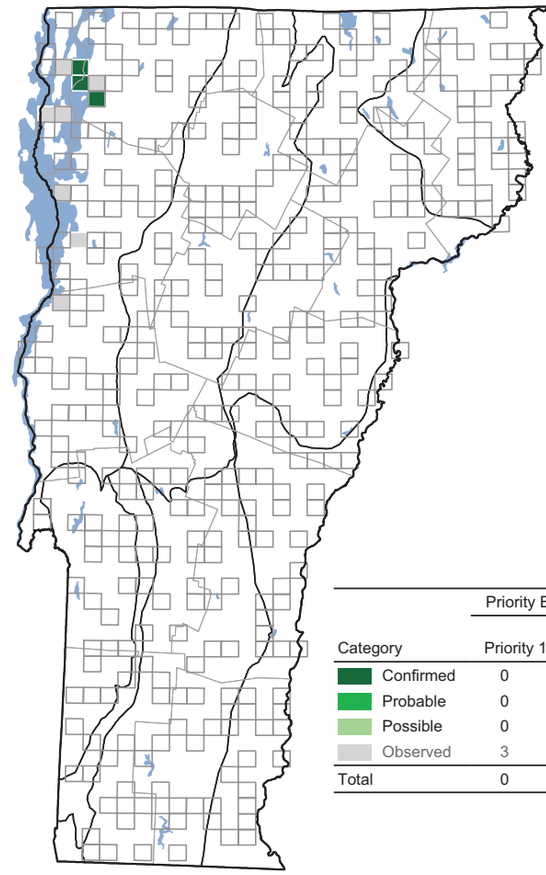
Population declines observed during the first atlas continued until 1988 when, with only 50 breeding pairs, the Common Tern was listed as an endangered species in the state. Intensive management efforts by the Vermont Common Tern Recovery Project increased the population to 170 pairs by the end of the second atlas. Management included limiting human disturbance by posting and acquiring nesting islands, controlling populations of Ring-billed Gull and Double-crested Cormorant, which both usurp nesting islands and, in the gull's case, predate tern chicks. Social attraction methods including the use of decoys and broadcast tern vocalizations have been employed to reintroduce terns to traditional nesting locations. Great Horned Owl predation, however, has continued to plague the population (LaBarr 2007a).

Similarly managed populations in the Great Lakes and along the East Coast are stable and in some cases increasing, although Breeding Bird Survey data have shown that smaller, unmanaged populations throughout the interior have declined by up to 70 percent during the past four decades (NAS 2007a). Resightings and recaptures of banded Common Terns have linked Vermont colonies to populations along the St. Lawrence River, Oneida Lake, and Lake Ontario (M. LaBarr unpubl. data). The population goal for recovery and delisting of this species in Vermont is 300 breeding pairs (LaBarr 1996).

Regionally, Common Tern is listed as threatened in New York and as a priority species for Bird Conservation Region 13 (Lower Great Lakes / St. Lawrence Plain). Although increasing population trends are encouraging, continued management will be necessary for the Common Tern to persist on the islets of Lake Champlain.

MARK LABARR





Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	0	1
Probable	0	0
Possible	0	0
Observed	3	5
Total	0	1

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	0	0	+ 0	+ 0

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	1	100
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0