

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

As far as San Diego County is concerned, “common” is now a misnomer for the Common Tern, now far outnumbered at any season by the similar Forster’s Tern. Abundant as a fall migrant as recently as the 1970s, the Common Tern is now uncommon. Former regular summering and irregular wintering appear to have ceased.

Migration: In San Diego County, the Common Tern migrates primarily offshore, but the birds pause to rest on beaches and in coastal wetlands. Fall migrants begin arriving by 12 July (1999, four at the Santa Margarita River mouth, G4, P. A. Ginsburg), peak in late August, then dwindle away through November. In spring, arrival is normally in mid April, but two at the San Diego River mouth (R7) 21 March 1991 were most likely early spring migrants, as none had been in the area earlier in the winter (G. McCaskie, AB 45:496, 1991). Some may still be moving north in early June.

Though the Common Tern was long common at the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003), the only inland records in San Diego County have been from Lake Hodges (K10) in fall 1979 (two on 5 August, G. McCaskie; one on 2 September, D. M. Parker) and at Bonita (T11) 2 May 1931 (SDNHM 14529).

In the 1960s and 70s, 30–60 immature Common Terns typically summered on the Silver Strand (T9), with a maximum of 150 on 23 June 1967 (AFN 21:605, 1967). But the only recent report of a clearly summering bird was of one at the south end of San Diego Bay (V10) 25 June 2002 (M. Sadowski).

Winter: Formerly, a few Common Terns wintered on San Diego Bay or at the San Diego River mouth. Numbers as high as 51 on the San Diego Christmas bird count 21 December 1968 may have included some misidentified Forster’s Terns, but up to 15 were at Shelter Island (S8) 18–31 January 1975 (J. L. Dunn, AB 29:742, 1975). By 1980 only one or two were being found annually; after 1990 no more were reported.

Conservation: The atlas study was not designed to sample migrating water birds, so the numbers of Common Terns



Photo by Jack C. Daynes

occurring currently in San Diego County are unclear. But even though the Common can be overlooked easily among the abundant Forster’s Terns the complete lack of Common Terns recorded by the various systematic studies of birds on San Diego Bay from the late 1980s to mid 1990s suggests a significant change. Former numbers of Common Terns in fall ranged up to 1000 migrating south off La Jolla (P7) 17 August 1977 (J. L. Dunn) and 750 at the Santa Margarita River mouth 22 August 1978 (P. Unitt). But no such flocks of this size have been encountered recently; from 1997 through 2003 the only large concentrations reported were of 200 at the San Diego River mouth 5 September 2002 and 123 on the Silver Strand 15 August 2003 (M. Sadowski).

The decrease of Common Terns migrating through San Diego County may be due to problems in the breeding range, in the winter range, or both. Of the adverse factors identified by Nisbet (2002), the Common Tern’s high susceptibility to environmental contaminants and displacement of nesting colonies by burgeoning populations of gulls seem most likely to be affecting the birds breeding in central North America, the source for migrants reaching California.

Taxonomy: The only subspecies of the Common Tern collected in California is the red-billed *S. h. hirundo* Linnaeus, 1758, the subspecies breeding in North America.