

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

The Black Tern nests in inland marshes (no closer to San Diego County than California's Central Valley), then heads to a pelagic winter range off southern Mexico, Central America, and South America. Much of the population migrates by way of the Salton Sea, and few Black Terns now reach the coast of southern California. The species' population decline is reflected in greatly reduced numbers seen in San Diego County.

Migration: The Black Tern occurs in San Diego County primarily as a fall migrant, though by the beginning of the 21st century it was averaging only about two birds reported per year. In 1999 and 2001 it was missed completely. It is most frequent from late July to mid September but also occurs occasionally in spring and early summer. Extreme dates are 26 April (1991, San Diego, J. Brisson, AB 45:496, 1991) and 21 November (1958, Sweetwater Reservoir, S12, AFN 13:66, 1959), the six winter records excluded. The maximum number seen together recently is three, at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 13 June 1998 (B. C. Moore) and the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8) 11 May 2002 (M. B. Mulrooney). Black Terns generally occur along the coast or at ponds and lakes in the coastal lowland, inland to Lake Hodges (K10). Exceptions are two at the Borrego Springs sewage ponds (H25) 12 May 1990 (A. G. Morley) and a remarkable 41 at Lake Henshaw (G17) 10 August 1984 (R. Higson, AB 39:103, 1985).

Winter: Unitt (1984) summarized the six winter records, all coastal, and none more recent than 1977.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Conservation: No numerical data on the Black Tern's former status are available, but Willett (1933) considered the species a "common migrant" in coastal southern California, and Stephens (1919a) considered it "rather common" in San Diego County. Even in the 1970s it was seen much more frequently than at the turn of the millennium, with up to 13 in the Tijuana River valley 17 August 1977 (J. L. Dunn). Even though Black Terns take advantage of agriculture, making rice fields their principal nesting habitat in northern California (Shuford et al. 2001), their population as a whole has decreased seriously, possibly because of pesticide contamination, degradation of wetlands, and overfishing in the winter range (Dunn and Agro 1995).

Taxonomy: *Chlidonias n. surinamensis* is the subspecies of the Black Tern in the New World.