

## Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii*

**Status:** *State:* Endangered *Federal:* Endangered (North Atlantic breeding population)

### Identification

The roseate tern is a medium-sized, light colored tern with a dark cap and long tail. In breeding plumage, the adult has a black cap and nape, a pale gray back and underwing, white underparts, and a white rump. Black tips on the outer primaries contrast with the otherwise pale upperwing. The tail is white and deeply forked with long streamers. On perched birds, the tail extends beyond the wingtips. The bill is black with a dark red base. The legs and feet are dark red and the iris is brownish-black. Sexes are alike in plumage. The non-breeding adult has brown legs, a black bill, and a white forehead with a black mask extending from the eye to the nape.



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The juvenile roseate tern has a dark brown cap, a black bill, and black legs. The back is brown and barred, making it appear scaly. On juveniles, there is a white trailing edge on the wing and a dark carpal bar on the upperwing. The tail lacks the long streamers present in adults.

The flight of the roseate tern is light and graceful with rapid wingbeats. The call is a soft chew-ick and the alarm call is a harsh krack that resembles the sound of ripping fabric.

The roseate tern can be confused with the similar-appearing common tern (*Sterna hirundo*) and Forster's tern (*S. forsteri*), both of which are fairly common in New Jersey. The roseate tern has paler upperparts and a longer tail than the common tern. The call of the common tern is a harsh, protracted and descending kee-earr. Unlike the roseate tern, the Forster's tern has a gray tail and silvery gray outer primaries. The call of the Forster's tern is a harsh, abrupt kyarr.

### Habitat

The roseate tern is a coastal species that nests on barrier islands and salt marshes and forages over shallow coastal waters, inlets, and offshore seas. Nesting colonies are located above the high-tide line, often within vegetated dunes where dense concentrations of beach grasses and seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*) provide cover. In comparison to other terns, roseates nest at sites with more vegetative cover. Infrequently, they may nest in open areas, especially when they are displaced from optimal sites by gulls.

## Status and Conservation

Prior to 1890, the roseate tern nested along the New Jersey coast, although it was not common. From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, roseate tern populations along the Atlantic Coast were greatly reduced as a result of the millinery trade, in which birds were killed to acquire plumes for women's hats. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which afforded legal protection to all migratory birds, coupled with a change in fashion styles, reduced the pressure on roseate terns, enabling populations to reestablish and increase. Nesting roseate terns were observed at Hereford Inlet and Five Mile Beach in the 1930s and at Brigantine in the 1940s. However, by the 1950s, populations again began to decline and continued to do so for several decades. Breeding roseate terns were documented in New Jersey in the 1970s, when nesting pairs occurred at Little Egg Inlet, Brigantine, Sandy Hook, Holgate, and Barnegat Bay. The last nesting pair in the state was recorded in 1980. Unchecked development and high levels of recreational activity along the barrier islands have resulted in habitat loss and disturbance to beach-nesting birds, contributing to the decline of this species.

Due to severe population declines in the state, the roseate tern was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1979. Because of a drastic worldwide decline in its population, the roseate tern was reclassified as an endangered species in New Jersey in 1984. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service included the North Atlantic breeding population on its list of federally endangered species in 1987 because of declines resulting from human activity, gull competition, and predation. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the roseate tern to be a non-breeding species in the state and globally "very rare and local throughout its range" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). The National Audubon Society included the roseate tern on its Blue List of Imperiled Species in 1972 and from 1979 to 1986, the final year of the list. Depressed roseate tern populations are evident throughout other northeastern states, where the species is listed as endangered (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Virginia), or threatened (Maine, New Hampshire).