ROYAL TERN
Sterna maxima

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Laridae
FNAI Ranks: G5/S3
U.S. Status: None
FL Status: None

breeding range

U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act and state Wildlife Code prohibit take of birds, nests, or eggs. Many seabird colonies are fenced and posted during breeding season; some of most important are state-designated as Critical Wildlife Areas.
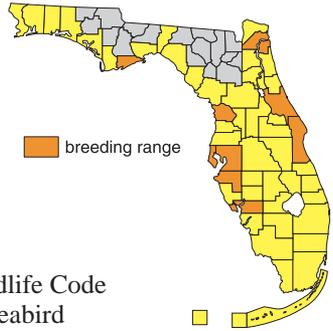
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Description: A large tern with a long, moderately thick, orange-red bill, grayish flight feathers, white underparts, and a deeply forked tail. Adults have a black, crested cap for a short time during the breeding season. Immatures and nonbreeding adults have a white forehead and black streaked or black crest (black does not usually encompass eye).

Similar Species: Differs from Caspian tern (*Sterna caspia*) in having a thinner, more orange bill; underside of primary flight feathers mostly pale (vs. dark); tail more deeply forked; and in immature and nonbreeding plumages, a white crown and forehead (vs. dusky or streaked).

Habitat: Coastal areas throughout Florida, including beaches, lagoons, bays, estuaries, and inlets. Occasional to common on some large inland lakes and phosphate pits in central Florida. Loafs and sleeps on sandbars, mudflats, beaches. Nests are shallow depressions scraped out in dry sand, well above high-tide levels, usually on small islands. Nests also on dredge spoil islands. Usually seen (including nesting) in association with gulls, skimmers, and other terns, especially sandwich terns (*S. sandvicensis*; see species account).

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Seasonal Occurrence: Permanent resident around coast; population augmented by northern migrants in winter. Large concentrations at breeding colonies, May – July.

Florida Distribution: Nonbreeding and wintering royal terns found along both coasts, the Keys, and inland around large lakes and rivers, and phosphate pits. At least 10 breeding colonies have been identified (1987 - 1996) from Franklin, Citrus, Pinellas, Hillsborough, Manatee, and Charlotte counties on the Gulf coast and Nassau, Volusia, Brevard, and Indian River counties on the Atlantic coast.

Range-wide Distribution: Also breeds locally in southern California (rarely), Baja California, the western Mexico coast south through Sinaloa, and the Tres Marias Islands on the Pacific coast; Gulf coast west to southern Texas, Atlantic coast from Chesapeake Bay south through West Indies (irregular in location, year, and number of pairs) to northern South America, the Uruguay coast, and islands off Mauritania in West Africa.

Conservation Status: Historically more widespread than now. Possibly extirpated as a breeding species in early 1900s, until 1950s. Rough estimate of breeding population, based on reports of various colonies between 1987 and 1993, was about 5,600 pairs, and appears to be about the same in 2000. This is a possible decrease of 3,800 birds since the early 1980s. However, large fluctuations in colony size are commonly observed from year to year. Most nesting sites are in public ownership and/or are designated as Critical Wildlife Areas. Human disturbance and harassment, habitat destruction, and pollutants are current and potential problems at colony sites and roosting and foraging sites. Natural threats include predators and extreme high tides during nesting season. The large concentrations of terns at colony sites leave them vulnerable to single disasters, whether natural or manmade, which may significantly affect the total population.

Protection and Management: Most colony sites are posted and monitored by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Audubon of Florida. Increased management needed for people and pets (e.g., posting and law enforcement) at some colony sites and probably at many loafing and foraging sites. Keep dredge spoil islands and causeway right-of-ways free of thick vegetation to extend use of these sites by terns.

Selected References: McNair and Gore 1999, Paul and Schnapf 2000, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Stevenson and Anderson 1994.