

SANDWICH TERN

Thalasseus sandvicensis

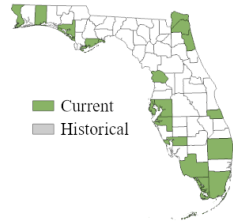
Order: Charadriiformes

Family: Laridae

FNAI Ranks: G5/S2

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: none



Description: Medium-sized, slim, crested tern with a slender black bill tipped with yellow (often lacking in juveniles). A black cap is present during breeding season; nonbreeding adults and juveniles have a white forehead and a less prominent black crest. Breeding adult has pale gray upperparts and a white rump and tail; legs and feet are black. Long, narrow wings are darker on outer primaries. White underparts with dark trailing edge to primaries.

Similar Species: Much smaller than the other crested terns (royal - *Sterna maxima*, see species account; and Caspian - *S. caspia*), and the only one with a black bill; yellow tip is also distinctive. Gull-billed tern (*S. nilotica*) is similar in size but stocky, with a thicker, all-black bill.

Habitat: Coastal areas throughout Florida, including beaches, bays, estuaries, mudflats, inlets, lagoons, and dredge spoil islands. Nests are small depressions or scrapes in unvegetated sand or sand-shell substrates on barrier beaches, sandflats, and spoil islands. Commonly seen with other terns (especially royal), gulls, and skimmers.

Seasonal Occurrence: Resident along coasts, although becomes less frequent in the north during winter. Transients and overwintering migrants augment numbers, especially along Gulf coast of the central peninsula and Keys. Nests April - July.

Florida Distribution: Currently nests at only four or five sites on the Gulf coast in Franklin, Citrus, Hillsborough, and Manatee counties, with the large majority of pairs occurring at Passage Key National Wildlife Refuge. In the 1970s, nested on an island in Nassau Sound (Duval County) on the Atlantic coast. Nonbreeding and wintering sandwich terns are found along both coasts and the Keys, but are scarce in north Florida in winter. Also found at inland sites, often following storms or during migration.

Range-wide Distribution: Breeds locally on Atlantic coast from Virginia to Florida and on Gulf coast west to southern Texas; Bahamas and Greater Antilles and off the Yucatan Peninsula, south to northern South America; coastal areas in the Old World from Scandinavia, British Isles south to the northern Mediterranean coast, and Black and Caspian seas. Winters from Florida south to northern Argentina on the Atlantic coast and Peru on the Pacific coast, and southern European coasts south along west coast of Africa and the Arabian Sea.

Conservation Status: Recent increases in estimates of breeding population, from roughly 200 pairs in the early 1990s to approximately 500 pairs based on 2000 data. Most nesting sites are in public ownership and/or are designated as Critical Wildlife Areas. Like other coastal species, habitat destruction, pollutants, and disturbance and harassment by humans are current and potential problems at colony sites and at roosting and foraging sites. Natural threats include predators and extreme high tides during the nesting season.

Protection and Management: Manage 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 rights-of-way free of thick vegetation to extend use of these sites by terns.

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



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