

Rare Animals of Louisiana



Gull-billed Tern

Gelochelidon nilotica

Rarity Rank: S2B,S2S3N/G5

	1	2	3	4	5
State					
Global					
	imperiled		rare		secure



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Photo by Jim Scarff

Identification:

- Resembles a gull in body shape and behavior
- Thick, black bill
- Upperparts are light gray and underneath is white
- Wings are unmarked and wider than other terns
- Tail is short and notched in the middle
- Crown and nape of breeding adults are black
- Adults can be up to 38 cm in length and have a wingspread of 94 cm

Habitat:

- Coastal beaches and estuaries, sparsely vegetated nearshore islands, and barrier islands
- Generally nests within colonies of Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*) on open beaches above high tide level
- Feeds and nests around marshes
- Most nests are on sandy beaches or barrier islands along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts

Food habits:

Feeds primarily on insects caught in the air, but also on small fish, reptiles and amphibians

Range:

- Breeding Range: Locally along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from New York to Mexico; southern California, the Caribbean, and coastal South America; also Old World
- Winters from the Gulf coast through coastal Central America to South America
- In Louisiana, an uncommon and local summer resident along the coast, but may be found coast-wide in the winter



Range based on occurrences in Natural Heritage database

Reproduction:

- Lays three eggs in a shallow depression that is usually lined with rocks or shells
- Incubation period of 22 to 23 days
- Brooding and feeding carried out by both parents

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Threats:

- Major concern is human disturbance through boating, recreation and development
- In many areas colonies can be overrun by gulls
- Coastal land loss

Beneficial Management Practices:

- Protection of occupied as well as potential nesting sites
- Gull control for established tern colony sites

LA River Basins:

Pontchartrain, Mississippi, Barataria, Terrebonne, Atchafalaya, Vermilion-Teche, Mermentau

References:

Parnell, J. F., R. M. Erwin, and K. C. Molina. 1995. Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 140 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.