

## Terns

**Terns** are slim and graceful waterbirds, quite similar to gulls. In fact, both gulls and terns belong to the same family, Laridae, although terns have their own subfamily, Sterninae. Three species are found in Alaska—the **Arctic tern** (*Sterna paradisaea*), the **Aleutian tern** (*Onychoprion aleutica*), and the **Caspian tern** (*S. caspia*).

The Arctic tern has the greatest breeding range of any Alaskan water bird, nesting from Point Barrow through the Southeast Panhandle and all points in between, including inland sites. Arctic terns are also the champion migrators of the bird world. Every year they make the 24,000-mile round-trip between their breeding grounds in the north and their wintering grounds in the Antarctic.

Aleutian terns are less common. They breed only in Alaska and eastern Siberia. Strictly coastal birds, they nest from Kotzebue Sound and the Norton Sound islands out to the Aleutians, Kodiak, the Alaska Peninsula, and along the southern coast to Dry Bay near Yakutat. Large numbers have recently been nesting in the Copper River Delta. Little is known about the winter range, but observations of Aleutian terns in the waters around Hong Kong in the spring and fall, and around Singapore and the nearby Indonesian Island of Bintan in the South China Sea between October and April indicates that some birds migrate through and winter in these areas. The coastal waters of Java and Bali in this same region may also be part of their winter range.

Caspian terns are quite rare in Alaska, although in recent years sightings have increased and there is now a small breeding colony in the Copper River area. This species nests locally in many areas across western North America and winters along the southern California and Mexico coast.

**General description:** Terns have long, gray wings and webbed feet. They are generally smaller than gulls and more trimly built with sharp-pointed bills and forked tails. Because of their tails and their agility and quickness in flight, terns have sometimes been called “sea swallows.” They are quicker than gulls and can hover. They rarely go far in the air without flapping their wings. Terns fly with their bills pointed down at right angles to the water. Because their webbed feet are small, terns don’t swim well and are seldom in the water longer than it takes to catch a mouthful of food.

Arctic and Aleutian terns are very similar in appearance and difficult to differentiate, especially since they often mix in coastal breeding grounds. Both have a black cap, but the Aleutian has a white forehead. Also, the Arctic tern has a bright red bill, feet and legs, while the Aleutian’s are black. The Aleutian’s wings are a darker gray than those of the arctic tern. The call of the arctic tern is high-pitched and rasping. The Aleutian tern has a three syllable whistle which sounds more like a shorebird than the other terns. The Caspian tern is a larger, more robust bird than the other two. It has a much thicker red bill, and the tail is shorter and not nearly so forked. Its call is a quite distinctive low, rasping “kaar.”

**Life history:** Terns arrive at their breeding areas in early to late May, depending on latitude. They choose mates and begin nesting very soon thereafter. Nests are commonly made near fresh or salt water on sandpits, beaches, and islands, or inland on wet tundra and near ponds. Nests are little more than shallow depressions scraped in the ground with little or no lining material. A tern’s nest is almost impossible to spot unless it contains eggs. Two eggs are usually laid, lightly speckled and brownish or greenish in color. Both sexes incubate them, and the eggs hatch in about 23 days. The young leave the nest quickly and hide in the neighboring vegetation. They are fed small fish which have been caught and carried to them in their parents’ bills.

After about 25 days the young have fledged and are able to fly. Less than three months after their arrival, most terns have left the breeding areas and started their migrations. Young terns mature and are ready for mating in three to four years.

Terns are long lived for gulls and records indicate some Arctic terns have lived to their late 20s and early 30s.

**Feeding and behavior:** Terns are expert fishers. They fly over water, sometimes hovering over a spot until they see a small fish, whereupon they plunge in after it. They arise out of the water immediately with their catch. Terns also eat insects and small invertebrates.

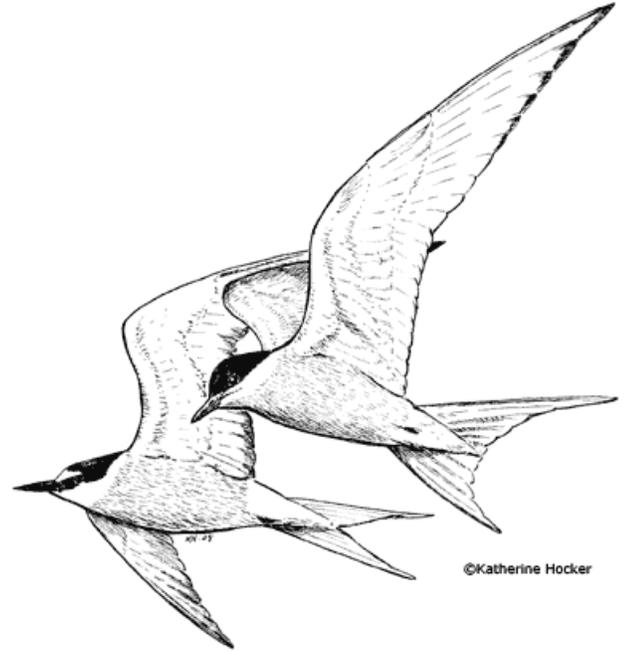
During courtship, the male performs a ceremonial “fish flight,” in which he carries a small fish in his bill and passes low over a female on the ground. If she takes notice she’ll join him in a high fluttering climb and flight.

Arctic terns are very aggressive, especially on their breeding grounds. They will attack and mob intruders, crying loudly and raucously and diving continually at the invader’s head. Aleutian terns are much more wary. Instead of mobbing human intruders, they will soar up in a circling climb until they are almost out of sight and remain aloft until the intruder leaves. Aleutian terns are more aggressive toward aerial intruders, however, and will mob winged predators or other unwelcome birds in the area.

One of the great wonders of the natural world is the migration of the Arctic tern. Because it spends summer in the north and winter in the Antarctic, this bird experiences more daylight than any other creature. The 12,000 mile flight between polar regions is completed twice a year. One Arctic tern, banded in the arctic, was recaptured 11,000 miles away less than three months later. The flight is even more remarkable when you consider that it was made far offshore by a bird that is not a particularly good swimmer.

**Populations:** The Aleutian tern was first discovered on Kodiak Island but was named with the expectation that it would be found breeding in the Aleutians. It wasn’t until some years later that the theory was proven correct. The Aleutian tern was once thought to be quite rare, but studies have documented more birds in recent years. The world population is estimated at 17,000 to 20,000 birds, the breeding population for Alaska is estimated at 9,500 birds.

The world population of Arctic terns is estimated to be between one and two million breeding pairs, several hundred thousand pairs probably nest in Alaska.



Terns are not great in number compared with other waterbirds. Tern eggs and hatchlings are particularly vulnerable to predators, and terns are very sensitive to intrusions in their breeding areas. These handsome, graceful birds live in a very delicate balance with the natural environment.

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