



## **Brunswick Wildlife Terns**

Eight species of terns are found in Brunswick County at various times during the year: Royal, Sandwich, Common, Least, Gull-billed, Caspian, Forster's, and Black. The first five species breed on Lower Cape Fear area beaches and spoil islands.

In addition to our expected terns, others may rarely show up during migration and pelagic terns that are normally found well off our coast, Bridled and Sooty Terns, may be seen occasionally after hurricane or other strong east or northeast winds push them near shore. Except for nesting, pelagic birds spend most of their year on the open sea.

Terns are members of the subfamily Sterninae...a subfamily of the Laridae family which also includes gulls and the Black Skimmer. Terns are sleeker and have smaller, more sharply pointed bills than gulls.

The Least Tern pictured above in alternate (breeding) plumage may be identified easily by its size, bright yellow bill, and the white patch on its forehead. It migrates south for the winter and returns to our area during the spring to breed. The Least is our smallest tern and standing beside our largest, the Caspian, looks like a small outboard standing next to a large yacht.

The other tern pictured above is the Forster's Tern that spends the winter with us. Other than a few Caspian and Royal Terns, it is the only tern you will likely see during the winter. It is pictured in its winter plumage, with its full black cap reduced to the spot around its eye. The Least Tern only appears larger since the image has been enlarged.

Black Terns nest on freshwater lakes in the northern United States and Canada and are seen in small numbers in our area during fall migration, beginning in late July. They are a special treat because, during the fall, they will be seen in their mostly-black breeding plumage.

Brunswick County terns mainly eat fish, shrimp, and other crustaceans. They capture prey by the plunge-diving method we are most familiar with or they use diving-to-surface or dipping from the surface methods of foraging. Several species such as Black, Royal, and Gull-billed Terns also eat insects plus the Gull-billed has a fondness for lizards! The Gull-billed Tern generally does not plunge-dive so if you see a tern diving into a marsh's mud flats do not worry about it burying its head in the mud.

Most terns practice kleptoparasitism...stealing food from other terns or species...and are likewise victims themselves. Terns with a fish too large to swallow immediately or those returning to a nest with prey in their bills are targeted, sometimes by several gulls. Like Royal Terns, most out fly kleptoparasites, even those of their own species. Kleptoparasitism, however, is a crime that does pay or evolution would not have allowed it to exist.

Terns are ferocious in jointly defending their colony. If a predator such as a gull flies near the colony, a number of terns will take to the air and force the invader out...reminiscent of those little fighter planes in Star Wars.

If you get too close, they will come after you. I know because I have assisted researchers in taking tern nest censuses. In addition to buzzing us, the terns dive-bombed us ground-based "predators" with the white stuff!

Least Terns sometimes establish their colony of scrape nests on flat, gravel rooftops of large stores. One such location is near Lowe's on College Road in Wilmington. One afternoon, I watched as the little guys took on several crows that flew over their colony. Now that was better than any action movie!

Time for some tern watching and remember, as my grandmother use to say, "One good tern deserves another". At least I think that's what she said...

John Ennis

