



Roseate Tern

(*Sterna dougallii*)

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE • MONOMOY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Walking along the beach on a beautiful summer day, you notice several fork-tailed coastal birds flying low above the ocean's surface. They are terns, silvery-white birds with black caps and strident calls that patrol the waters off our beaches and frequently plunge into the surf to catch small fish. Several kinds of terns breed in the northeastern United States along the Atlantic Coast. If you are a careful observer and are in the right location, you may note a few terns with exceptionally pale plumage, long tail feathers, and bills that are mostly black. If so, you have seen the roseate tern, a species so rare that it was added to the federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in 1987.

An endangered species is in danger of extinction;
a threatened species is likely to become
endangered within the foreseeable future.

Description

Early in the breeding season, the roseate tern's breast feathers have a faint pink tint, giving the bird its name. Their bills, mostly black in the summer, distinguish them from similar species of terns with red or orange bills. About 15 inches long including their tail, roseate terns are agile, graceful fliers. Roseates usually nest among dense colonies of common terns.

Once fairly common in the United States, they are now found only on a few coastal islands from Maine to Long Island, New York. Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge has historically been an important nesting site for roseate terns.

While the population fluctuates from year to year in the Northeast, it has recently been relatively stable at about 3,000 pairs. This figure represents only a third of the number that existed in the 1930s. Even more remarkably, nearly half of breeding roseates in North America now nest in Massachusetts.

Nesting Habits

Adult roseate terns return to the Northeast at the beginning of May after wintering along the northern coast of South America. By the end of the month, most birds have paired and selected nesting sites, which are little more than

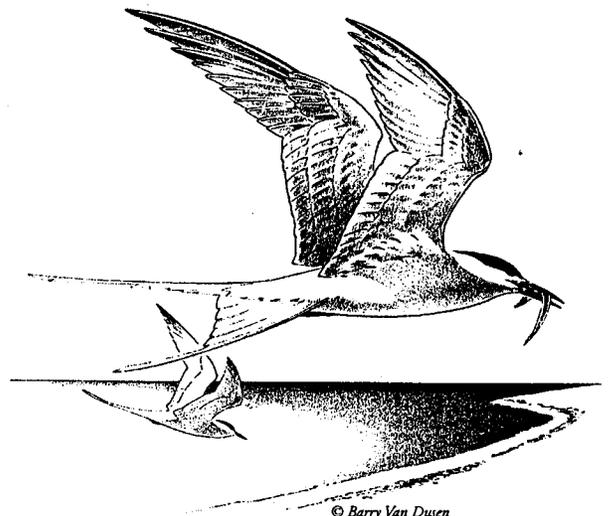
shallow scrapes on bare ground that are frequently concealed under beach vegetation, rocks, or driftwood.

The birds take turns incubating the clutch of one or two eggs, which hatches in about 23 days. Parents bring small fish to the young chicks, and chicks leave the nest when they are 22 to 29 days old.

By early August, the terns have left the nesting islands altogether. In September they head out to sea and back to their wintering grounds. Young birds do not return to nest until they are 2 or 3 years old.

Distribution, Abundance, and Threats

Virtually all of the tern species and most other colonial nesting waterbirds, or birds that nest in groups or colonies, were extremely vulnerable to egg collecting and gunning for the millinery markets that peaked at the end of the 19th century. Protective laws such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and changes in hat styles enabled the roseate tern and many other waterbird populations to recover by the 1930s. Another decline took place during the 1970s with the loss of nesting colony sites, and by 1978, 90 percent of the entire population was in four large colonies: one in New York, one in Connecticut, and two in Massachusetts, one of which was on Monomoy.



In recent decades, herring gulls and great black-backed gulls have increased in number because of an abundant supply of human-generated food in open landfills and have become a problem for roseate terns. These large, aggressive birds, which initiate their nesting weeks before the terns arrive, have displaced terns from their traditionally preferred nesting sites. Gulls also prey on terns by killing chicks and eating eggs. Encroachment by herring and great black-backed gulls on the nesting colonies is among the most serious threats to nesting terns in the northeastern United States.

In 1973, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in response to the realization that the nation's ongoing economic growth and development have resulted in the extinction of various species of fish, wildlife, and plants. Other species, like the roseate tern, are so depleted in numbers that they are one step away from extinction. The Act has three major aims:

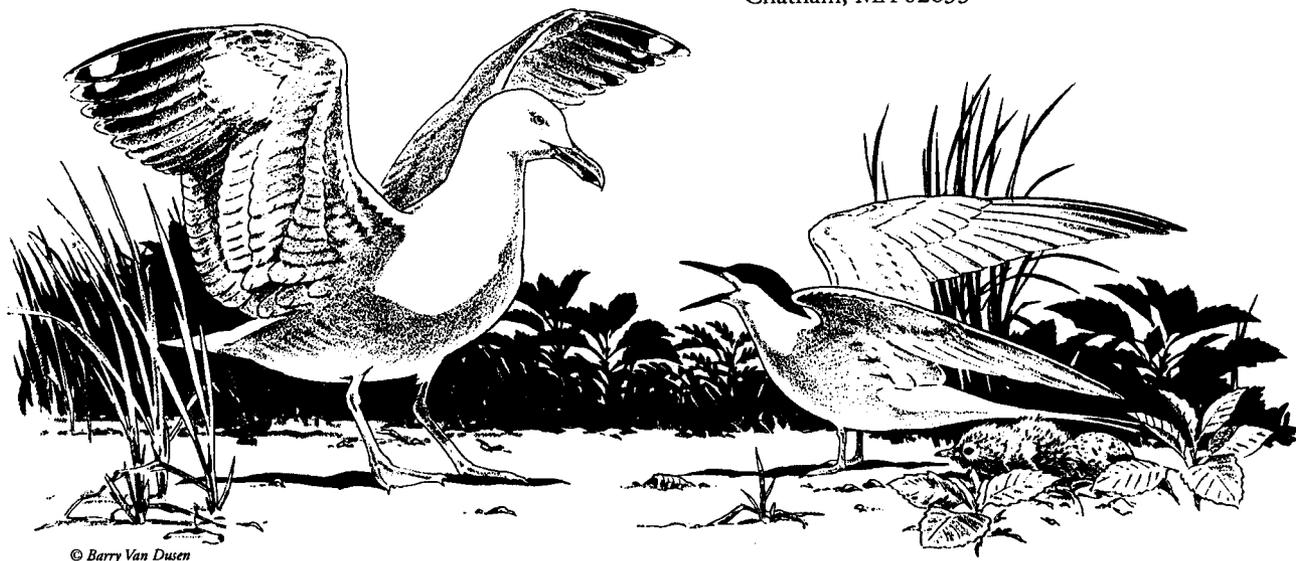
- to identify species in trouble and list them as officially in need of protection;
- to protect remaining populations of these species in order to stop their decline;
- to help species recover so they will be able to sustain themselves in the wild.

At Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, Service biologists are working to protect roseate terns by implementing several techniques to ensure their nesting and breeding success. Service staff and volunteers are establishing a gull-free area on a portion of one island to provide nesting habitat for roseate terns and other species. They have also placed roseate tern nesting boxes on the refuge to encourage successful hatching and fledging of young chicks. And to prevent disturbance by people, certain areas of the refuge are closed to the public during the breeding season.

If people do not act to protect endangered species, we cannot assume they will be there for future generations; we can only be sure that our quality of life will be diminished every time a species disappears forever.

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1944 and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, provides habitat for a diversity of bird species, especially those protected by the Endangered Species Act. To find out more about roseate terns, the Endangered Species Act, or the refuge, call the refuge headquarters at (508) 945-0594 or write to:

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge
Wikis Way
Chatham, MA 02633



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides the federal leadership to conserve, protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources and their habitat for the continuing benefit of people.

The Service manages more than 500 national wildlife refuges, representing the most comprehensive wildlife habitat management effort in the world. The Service also manages national fish hatcheries, enforces federal wildlife laws and international treaty obligations, and provides leadership in habitat protection.

National resources entrusted to the Service for conservation and protection are: refuges, migratory birds, fishery resources, threatened and endangered species, wetland resources, and certain marine mammals.

The Service's Northeast Region encompasses 13 states from Maine to Virginia with more than 100 field offices. Headquarters for the region is located in Hadley, Massachusetts.