

BREEDING BEHAVIOR BY A BLACK TERN ON A LONG ISLAND SALT MARSH

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A Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) on territory in an East Hampton, Long Island, salt marsh between late May and late July, 1985, provided a rare case of a summering, breeding-condition bird of this species in a coastal, estuarine environment. Black Terns are regular fall migrants on eastern Long Island, mostly at South Shore locations. Spring birds in breeding plumage are relatively rare and usually are seen in passage on fresh ponds.

A Black Tern was first observed in the area in late May at the mouth of Three Mile Harbor in East Hampton Town by two baymen (actually a bayman and a baywoman) who recognized it as an unusual species. Three Mile Harbor is a creek-fed salt estuary which opens north onto Gardiner's Bay. Black Terns are rare here at any time. Presumably this same individual was seen subsequently on the east side of the mouth of the harbor where it fished with Common and Roseate Terns. I observed the bird beginning in early June from the west side of the inlet where a sand spit closes off the harbor. This spit encloses a salt marsh (mostly *Spartina alterniflora*) and a number of sandy islands and sand edges with typical dune species. These islands are the site of a loose breeding colony of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*), Willets (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) and Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*); Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*), Roseate Terns (*S. dougallii*), American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) and Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) frequent the area but are not proven breeders.

All observers, including myself, initially assumed the bird to be a migrant in passage. However, it remained in the area throughout the month of June and most of July, joining in the general activity of the colony, repeatedly calling and often flying past me in a conspicuous manner as if investigating my activities, generally in company with the very vociferous Willets.

My observation post was a large spoil hill at the end of the sand spit from which I could overlook the inlet as well as the marsh and its islands. To avoid detection by Willets, I began to use an indirect approach, a spotting scope and a Red Cedar for a blind. But even if the Willets did not find me, the Black Tern invariably did, circling the observation post and calling. Nevertheless, after twenty to forty-five minutes, the bird would return to a fairly well-defined island territory, land in a characteristic wing-up posture and then move out of sight into the beach grass. It chased other terns, Common Grackles and Common

Crows from this area, sometimes with considerable effort and belligerence.

The bird usually fished in the narrow entrance to the harbor with Common and Roseate Terns. It had considerable success, generally catching Sand Launces or other small bait fish which it carried out over the Harbor. Then it came back in over the marsh and circled its island territory, calling loudly. On at least three occasions it came to the island with a fish and disappeared in the beach grass. A few minutes later it flew off without the fish. It also appeared to hunt over the tidal creeks and marshes but without observable success. No insect hawking was observed.

Its territory, at the highest point of the sand island, was covered with beach grass (*Ammophila*), tidal wrack and a few emergent shrubs. All nests, eggs, broken egg shells and chicks found on the island belonged to Common Terns or Spotted Sandpipers. When I examined the island, the Black Tern hovered in the area, calling loudly and displaying evidence of anxiety. Its agitation increased markedly in the clearly demarcated area where it normally landed but it made no diving attacks on me. This territorial behavior persisted into the third week of July, when all breeding activity in the colony ended.

There were persistent reports, dating from the spring observations, that two or more Black Terns were present. However, all observers whom I contacted reported only a single bird. During many hours of observations and three careful onsite inspections, I never saw or heard more than one bird at a time.

A brief survey of the literature reveals no records of coastal or salt-marsh nesting of this species in North America and there are few breeding-season reports anywhere on the coast. However Stone (1937) gives several reports of Black Terns in Common Tern colonies between 1921 and 1932. He thought these were misplaced birds who had been stimulated into similar behavior by the breeding and territorial activities of the colony. This is the most likely explanation. In such situations, isolated birds in breeding condition have been known to feed or attempt to feed chicks of other species; this may have been the case here. Intergeneric pairing, although unlikely, must also be considered as at least an outside possibility.

I would like to thank Jim Ash for calling my attention to the Witmer Stone reference.

LITERATURE CITED

Stone, Witmer, 1937. *Bird Studies at Old Cape May; An Ornithology of Coastal New Jersey*. Dover Publications, New York, N.Y. (reprint).

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