

A WHITE-WINGED TERN NESTS IN NEW YORK STATE

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The Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) has been classified as a species of special concern in New York State since 1983. In 1989, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) began a study aimed at identifying the factors responsible for the decline of this species in the State. During the 1992 field season, three Black Tern nesting areas in DEC Region 6 were monitored for nesting success.

On 17 June 1992, we canoed through the Stone Mills Pool of Perch River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Jefferson County, looking for Black Tern nests. Bob Miller, DEC's nongame wildlife unit leader accompanied us. A nesting colony of approximately thirty Black Tern was located. While examining nests, an unusual call coming from one of the mobbing terns attracted our attention. The call was lower pitched and more "rattle-like" than the typical black tern alarm call. The unusual call came from a bird the size and shape of a Black Tern. It had a white tail, black wing linings, white patches on the upper wing, and reddish feet and legs. This bird, later confirmed as a White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*), appeared to have a nest in the midst of the Black Tern colony. We completed the nest examinations and left the area.

That afternoon we returned to confirm that the White-winged Tern was nesting. It was found to be tending a nest with a Black Tern. The nest contained one egg and was indistinguishable from a Black Tern nest. On 22 June, we returned to the site. The White-winged Tern was still present and the nest now contained three eggs.

We continued to monitor the nesting area for the next six weeks. On 8 July, there were still three eggs in the nest. On 13 July, we found two chicks swimming away from the White-winged Tern nest. The chicks did not look any different than Black Tern chicks. The nest was empty. One chick was banded with a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service band, but the other was too small. We estimated the chicks to be three to four days old.

Meanwhile, the operations staff of the DEC had constructed an observation platform from which the tern colony was easily viewed.



White-winged Tern on nest, Perch River Wildlife Management Area, Jefferson Co., New York, June 1992. Photograph by Irene Mazzocchi.

Nearly 500 birders visited the site, some from as far away as California. The White-winged Tern regularly could be seen flying in and out of the nest site. This behavior, frequent short visits to the nest, indicated that chicks were present and were being fed by the adult.

On 21 July we again canoed out to the nesting area, eight days after banding one chick from the White-winged Tern nest. There was no sign of chicks or mobbing adults at the nest site. A nearby Black Tern nest, which was expected to have newly hatched chicks, was also empty except for a few eggshell fragments. The area was disturbingly quiet. We proceeded to paddle out to the open water pool and found the White-winged Tern foraging there. There was no sign of the hybrid chicks.

Our observations of the bird's behavior and nesting site led us to believe that the chicks from the White-winged Tern and Black Tern nests were gone. Whether the culprit was a predator or the heavy rainstorm of the evening before we cannot say. We do know that the chicks were too young to be fledged. Although Black Tern

occasionally move their chicks away from the nest, the White-winged Tern was no longer acting as if it was tending chicks. For the next few days, it was occasionally spotted foraging over the open pool. Our last sighting of the White-winged Tern was on the evening of Wednesday 22 July

This is the only the third record of this species and the first documented instance of a White-winged Tern nesting in New York State, and only the second nesting reported from North America. The first, also a hybridization with Black Tern, occurred in Quebec (*American Birds* 40:447, 1181; 1986). Lone migrants of this species now are reported almost annually from the East Coast of the United States and southeastern Canada, and the species has been found casually in the Aleutian Islands. While White-winged X Black Tern hybridization has been noted in Europe, we did not know what to expect from this nest. At least two of the eggs hatched and the chicks seemed healthy. It is unfortunate that the chicks were lost at such an early age.

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