

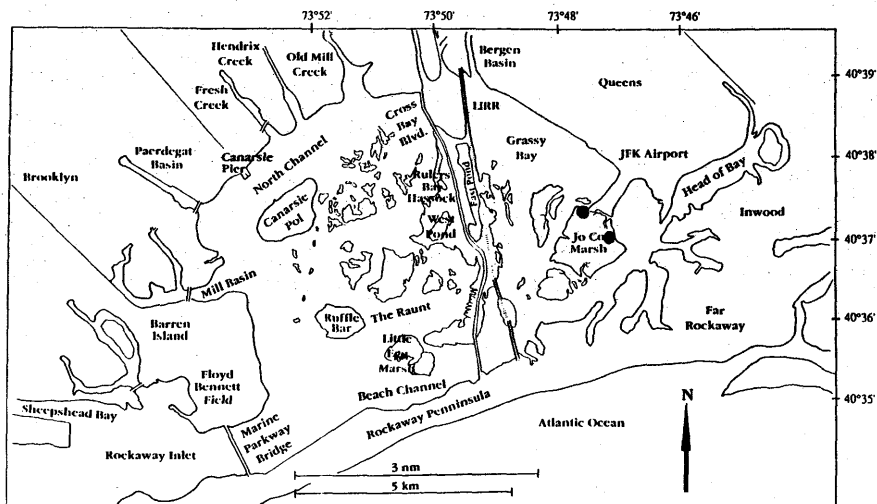
A FORSTER'S TERN COLONY AT JAMAICA BAY, NEW YORK CITY

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In 1991, Marilyn England, of the National Audubon Society, and the author discovered a single pair of Forster's Tern nesting among Common Tern at JoCo marsh in Jamaica Bay (Fig. 1). During the 1992 breeding season, a colony of approximately 53 pairs was nesting on the same marsh. During the 1993 breeding season, at least 40 pairs were present. The Forster's Tern were nesting alongside Common Tern, which have been using these marshes for a decade or more. They were readily distinguished from Common Tern by their raspy call, orangish bill, whiter primaries and longer forked tail.

Despite some nest loss due to flooding, the terns appeared to have a successful fledging year in the marsh. Flooding occurs during unusually high tides or storm related overwash, and is not equally severe every year. This colony experienced less flooding in 1993 than it did in 1992. The birds' preferred nesting substrate is dead *Spartina alterniflora* grass wrack at or near marsh creek edges (Fig 2). The accumulated wrack provides several inches of protection from tidal waters. They will also occasionally nest on *Spartina patens* high marsh (Fig. 3). Just inland from the creeks are colonies of Laughing Gull, the bulk of which nest in areas of short form *Spartina alterniflora*. Some gulls nest alongside and within tern colonies, but most seem to prefer higher marsh situations. From my observations, the terns seem to tolerate the nesting gulls and I've never witnessed any predation on the tern eggs or chicks. Other bird species nesting in these marshes include Clapper Rail, American Black Duck, Gadwall, Canada Goose, Boat-tailed Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, Seaside Sparrow, Willet and American Oystercatcher. Many of these birds nested on higher ground, usually old dredge spoil deposit sites at the marsh edge.

JoCo Marsh is a 200 acre saltmarsh situated in the eastern section of the bay adjacent to runway 4R/22L at John F Kennedy International



● - sites of nesting Forster's Terns

Figure 1. Location of Forster's Tern nesting sites in Jamaica Bay.

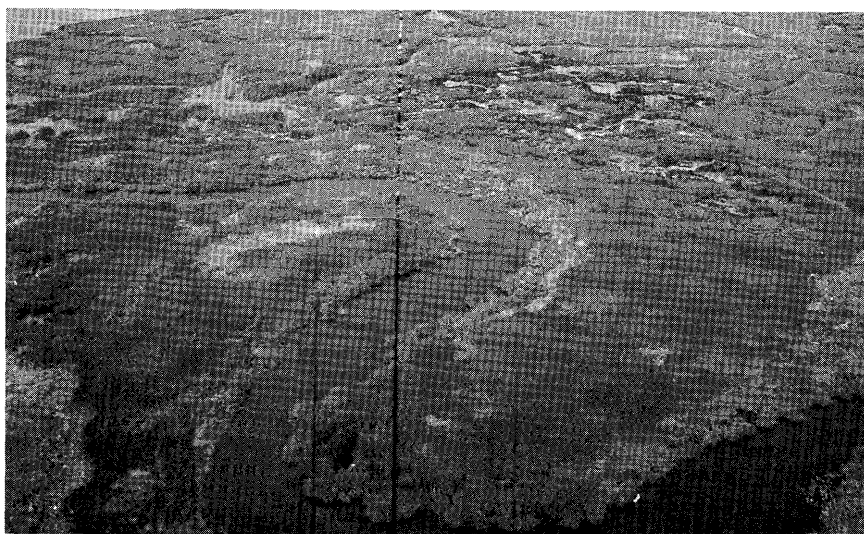


Figure 2. Aerial view of JoCo Marsh. Forster's Tern nested in wracks of dead *Spartina* near the creek edges, which appear as light spots in the photograph.



Figure 3. Forster's Tern nest habitat in *Spartina alterniflora* wrack.

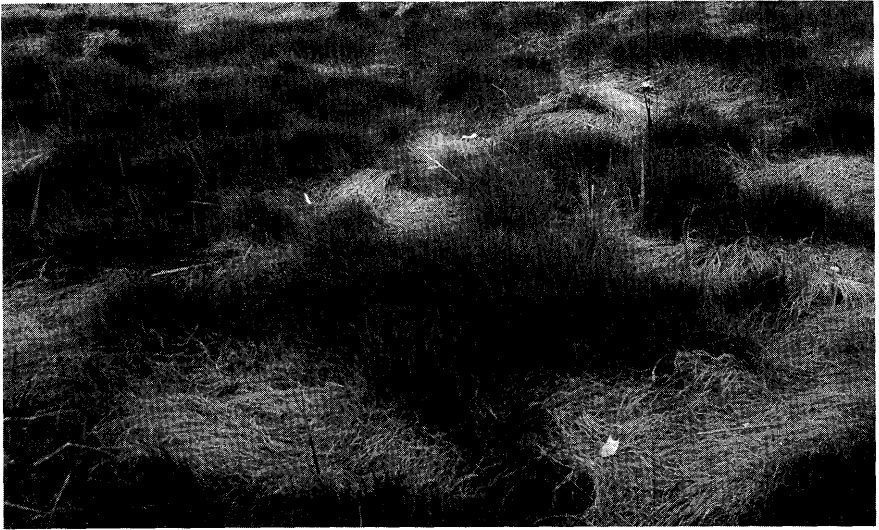


Figure 4. *Spartina patens* marsh utilized by some nesting Forster's Tern.

Airport (Fig 4). The marshes of Jamaica Bay are part of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, a 9,155 acre district of Gateway National Recreation Area. As such, they are protected from human intrusion by the National Park Service. The terns, however, are subject to predation by Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Common and Fish Crows, Boat-tailed Grackle, Northern Harrier and the very occasional stray dog. Despite these potential threats, the marshes offer better protection than recreational beaches, where cats, dogs, rats, vehicles and other human related activities compound these disturbances.

Connor (1988) summarizes the first known nesting records of Forster's Tern in New York State, all obtained since 1981. Since then, four pairs nested at two sites in Hempstead Bay (one at Deep Creek Meadow and three at Three-cornered Marsh) in 1990, and three pairs nested at Cuba Island in Hempstead Bay (Chris Liebelt, NYSDEC, pers. comm.) in 1991 and one pair was present in 1993 (Mike Scheibel, pers. comm.). The colony at Jamaica Bay, however, represents the first substantial colony recorded in New York State.

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LITERATURE CITED

- Connor, P. F. 1988. Forster's Tern. pp. 180-181, in Andrie, R. F., and J. R. Carroll, Eds. *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY