



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

## Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*

State Status: **Endangered**  
Federal Status: **Endangered**

The elegant Roseate Tern, with its long, white tail-streamers and rapid flight, alights on Massachusetts beaches in the spring. It tunnels under vegetation to nest within colonies of its more rough-and-tumble relative, the Common Tern, from which it derives protection from intruders. The Roseate Tern is a plunge-diver that feeds mainly on the sand lance, and availability of this fish may influence the timing of breeding. Depredations of plume hunters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and displacement from breeding sites by gulls and increased predation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to a decline in numbers and loss of major breeding sites in the northeast. In a sense, the Roseate Tern is emblematic of the Commonwealth, because for the past century, about half the northeastern population has nested in Buzzards Bay and outer Cape Cod. The Roseate is now considered an Endangered Species. The population, which increased from the 1980s through 2000, is now in decline. Several projects are in progress to restore the Roseate to historical breeding locations in Massachusetts.

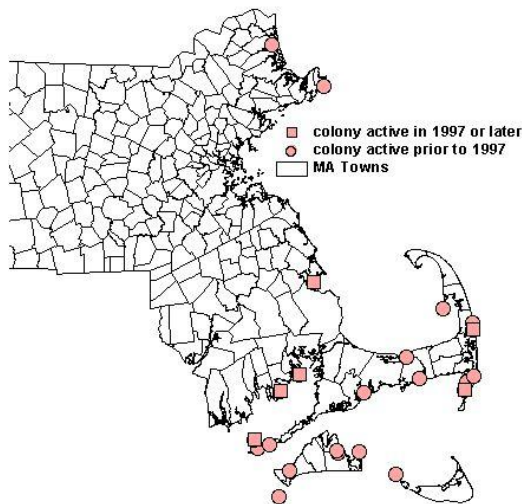


Figure 1. Distribution of present and historic Roseate Tern nesting colonies in Massachusetts.



Photo by B. Byrne, MDFW

**DESCRIPTION:** The Roseate Tern measures 33-41 cm in length and weighs 95-130 g. Breeding adults have pale gray upperparts, white underparts (flushed with pale pink early in the breeding season), a black cap, orange legs and feet, and a black bill (which becomes more red at the base as the season progresses). The tail is mostly white, and is deeply forked with two very long outer streamers, which extend well past the tips of the folded wings. In non-breeding adults, the forehead becomes white and the crown becomes white marked with black, merging with a black patch that extends from the eyes back to the nape. The down of hatchlings is distinctive: it is grizzled buff/black or gray/black, and is spiky-looking because the down filaments are gathered at the tips. Juveniles are buff or gray above, barred with black chevrons, and have a mottled forehead and crown, black eye-to-nape patch, and black bill and legs. The Roseate's vocal array includes a high-pitched *chi-vik* advertising call, and musical *kliu* and raspy *aaach* alarm calls, the latter sometimes likened to the sound of tearing cloth.

**SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS:** The Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) is similar in size, but has a black-tipped orange bill, darker gray upperparts,

*A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan*

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pale gray underparts, a shorter tail that does not extend beyond the folded wingtips, and an “irritable” voice. The Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) is also similar in size, but has a shorter, blood-red bill, very short red legs, gray underparts with contrasting white cheeks, a shorter tail (which still extends past the folded wingtips), and a very different, high-pitched voice. The Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) is markedly smaller, with a yellow-orange bill, a white forehead, and a short tail.

**DISTRIBUTION AND MIGRATION:** The Roseate Tern has a scattered breeding distribution primarily in the tropical and sub-tropical Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. In North America, it breeds in two discrete populations: from Nova Scotia south to New York and in the Caribbean. The northeast population, at about 40-45° N, is among the most northernmost nesting groups of this mostly tropical species. Roseates arrive in Massachusetts from late-April to mid-May to nest at just a handful of coastal locations (Fig. 1). The largest colonies occur in Buzzards Bay (see Status, below). Massachusetts birds depart from breeding colonies in late-July and August and concentrate in “staging areas” around Cape Cod and the Islands, before departure for wintering grounds in September. Roseates appear to feed offshore and return to the staging areas to rest and roost. Most have departed staging areas and have begun migrating southward by mid- to late-September. The Roseate’s wintering range remains poorly known, but increasing evidence indicates that Northeastern birds winter along the north and east coasts of South America southward along the coast of Brazil to approximately 18° S.

**BREEDING AND FORAGING HABITAT:** In Massachusetts, the Roseate Tern generally nests on sandy, gravelly, or rocky islands and, less commonly, in small numbers at the ends of long barrier beaches. Compared to the Common Tern, it selects nest sites with denser vegetation, such as seaside goldenrod and beach pea, which is also used for cover by chicks. Large boulders are used for cover at other locations in the northeast. It feeds in highly specialized situations over shallow sandbars, shoals, inlets or schools of predatory fish, which drive smaller prey to the surface. The Roseate is known to forage up to 30 km from the breeding colony.

**FOOD HABITS:** The Roseate Tern feeds almost exclusively on small fish; occasionally it includes

crustaceans in its diet. It is fairly specialized, consuming primarily sand lance (about 70% of diet in Massachusetts). Other prey species of importance in Massachusetts are herrings, bluefish, mackerel, silversides, and anchovies. In the northeast, it often forages with Common Terns. The Roseate captures food mainly by plunge-diving (diving from heights of 1-12 m and often submerging to  $\geq 50$  cm), but also by surface-dipping and contact-dipping. Some individuals specialize in stealing fish from Common Terns.

**BREEDING:**

*Phenology.* Roseates usually begin to arrive in Massachusetts in late-April or the first week of May. Egg dates are 12 May to 18 August, and laying usually begins about 8 days later than that of Common Terns in the host colony. Incubation lasts about 3 weeks, and the nestling period about 4 weeks.

*Colony.* The Roseate Tern is gregarious. In the northeast it nests in colonies of a few to about 1,700 pairs, and the largest colony in Massachusetts numbers about 1,100 pairs (see Status, below). In this portion of its range, the Roseate invariably nests with the Common Tern, forming clusters or sub-colonies within larger Common Tern colonies. Pairs defend their nest site. (See also Predation, below.)

*Pair-bond.* Courtship involves both aerial and ground displays, including spectacular High Flights (in which  $\geq 2$  birds spiral up to 30-300 m above ground and then descend in a zig-zag glide), and Low Flights (in which a fish-carrying male is chased by up to 12 other birds). Males feed females before and during the egg-laying period. The Roseate Tern is socially monogamous, but extra-pair copulations occur. Both parents spend roughly equal amounts of time incubating, and incubation shifts last about 26 minutes. Males and females also contribute approximately equally to brooding and feeding chicks. The average length of pair bonds in Connecticut was 2.5 years. The sex ratio in Massachusetts (and probably other northeast colonies) is skewed towards females (1.27 females:1 male). This results in multi-female associations ( $\geq 2$  females), and often  $\geq 3$ -egg clutches, at nests.

*Nests.* Nests (usually beneath vegetation or debris, or in special nest boxes) are depressions or “scrapes” in the substrate, to which nesting material may or may not be added throughout incubation. In the northeast, nests are usually 50-250 cm apart, depending on the distribution of vegetation and rocks.

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**Eggs.** Eggs are various shades of brown with dark spots and streaks. The second egg may be paler than the first. Eggs measure approximately 43 x 30 mm, and are subelliptical in shape. The eggs are difficult to distinguish from those of the Common Tern, but Roseate eggs are generally longer, more conical, less rounded, darker, and more uniformly and finely spotted. Clutch size is usually 1-2 eggs; older females generally lay 2 eggs (laid about 3 days apart), and younger females, 1 egg. Nests with  $\geq 3$  eggs are often attended by more than one female. Incubation, which begins after laying of the first egg, may be sporadic until the second egg is laid. The period between laying and hatching is about 23 days for both eggs.

**Young.** Chicks are semi-precocial. They are downy at hatching. Eyes open after a couple hours, and chicks are able to waddle and take food within hours after hatching. In 2-chick broods, there is often a substantial size difference between the young that persists throughout the growth period; this is because the first chick (*A*-chick) is usually 3 days older. Chicks are brooded/attended most of the day and night for the first few days of life. Parental attendance ceases after about a week, except for cold, rainy days. Parents carry prey to chicks in their bills one fish at a time. Feeding rates at sites in Massachusetts and Connecticut are about 1 fish/hour. At sheltered nests, undisturbed chicks may remain at the nest site until they are nearly fledged. Where there is more disturbance, chicks may move more than 60 m away to new hiding spots. In 2-chick broods, the younger chick (*B*-chick) is less likely to survive than the *A*-chick. Most losses of *B*-chicks appear to be due to starvation. The peak of fledging is at 27-30 days. Four to 10 days after fledging, young birds accompany parents to fishing grounds. They begin to catch fish after 3 weeks, but remain dependent on parents for food at least 6 weeks, or until migration in September. This notably long period of dependence reflects the highly specialized fishing techniques that the young must master. At Bird I., MA, family units depart the nesting colony 5-15 days post-fledging to congregate at staging locations. When two chicks are raised, the male leaves first with the older chick and the female leaves up to 7 days later with the younger chick. Nothing is known of family cohesion during migration.

#### **PREDATION:**

**Predators.** In North America, predators of Roseate Tern eggs, young, and adults include birds and mammals, snakes, ants, and land crabs. In the northeast, the Great

Horned Owl is the primary predator on adults, and predation on adults by the Peregrine Falcon has also been documented. Other significant avian predators (on eggs or chicks) include: Black-crowned Night-Heron, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, American Crow, and Red-winged Blackbird.

**Responses to predators and intruders.** The Roseate Tern prefers to nest on islands lacking mammalian predators. Eggs and chicks are cryptically colored and well-concealed under vegetation, debris, or rocks. Roseates are less aggressive birds than Common Terns, and rely on Commons for defense in the nesting colony. Attack rate peaks at hatching. Roseates dive at, and sometimes strike, various avian predators. Roseates circle above humans and dive at them, but do not make physical contact or defecate on them. Roseates in the Caribbean have been shown to respond more vigorously to familiar *versus* unfamiliar humans. As is the case for Common Terns, Roseates desert colonies at night when subject to nocturnal predation. This prolongs incubation periods for eggs, and exposes eggs and chicks to the elements and predation. Roseate nests and chicks, however, are better concealed, and thus less vulnerable, than those of Common Terns. Roseate adults, in contrast, are often disproportionately preyed upon in comparison to Common Terns from the same colony. Perhaps for this reason Roseates are quicker to abandon a site when predators are active.

**LIFE HISTORY PARAMETERS:** In Massachusetts, most Roseate Terns breed annually starting at 3 years old, some at  $\geq 4$  years. Only one brood per season is raised, but birds reneest after losing eggs or chicks. Estimating productivity is challenging due to inaccessible nest sites and chicks' hiding behavior, but productivity usually exceeds 1 chick fledged per pair (range: 0-1.6 chicks fledged per pair); older birds are more productive than younger ones. Survival from fledging to first breeding was estimated at about 20% for Connecticut birds. Annual survival of adults in the northeast was estimated to be about 80%. The oldest Roseate Tern documented was 25.6 years old; it was originally banded as a chick in Massachusetts.

**STATUS:** The northeastern population of the Roseate Tern is listed as Endangered federally and in Massachusetts principally because of its range contraction and secondarily because of its declining numbers. Prior to 1870, its status was somewhat obscure, but the Roseate was considered to be an

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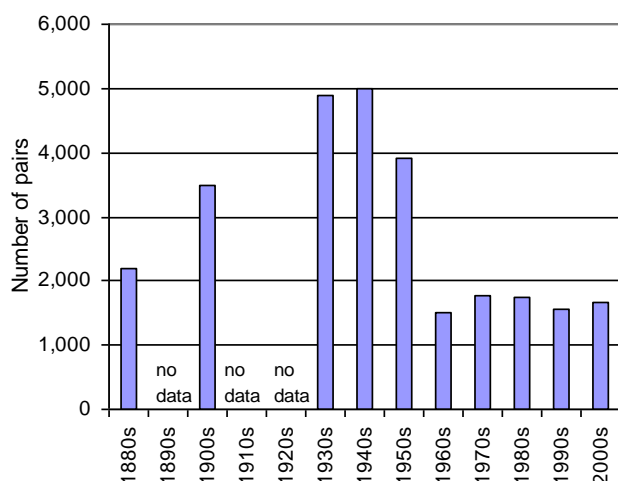
abundant breeder within Common Tern colonies on Nantucket and Muskeget Is., MA. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, eggging was a problem in northeast colonies, but it was persecution of terns for the plume industry that greatly reduced numbers in the northeast to perhaps 2,000 pairs, mostly at Muskeget and Penikese Is., MA, by the 1880s. Following protection, numbers rose to the 8,500 pair level in 1930. From the 1930s through the 1970s, Roseates were displaced from nesting colonies by Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, and had declined to 2,500 pairs by 1979. Following two decades of fairly steady increase, the Northeast U.S. population peaked at 4,310 pairs in 2000. Since then, however, the population has declined rapidly to 3,320 pairs (Roseate Tern Recovery Team, unpubl. 2006 data). The cause of this has not been identified, but data suggest that it may be related to mortality on the wintering grounds.

Approximately 85% of the population is dangerously concentrated at just 3 colonies: Great Gull Island, NY (1,227 pairs); Bird I., Marion, MA (1,111); and Ram I., Mattapoisett, MA (463). The only other nesting colonies in Massachusetts in 2006 were at Penikese I. (48 pairs) and Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) (S. Monomoy and Minimoy Is.), Chatham (26 pairs).

Desertion of  $\geq 30$  major breeding sites over the past 80 years in most cases has been related to occupation of sites by gulls, and secondarily, to predation in the colonies (which may have intensified as terns were displaced by gulls to sites closer to the mainland). While populations in the state receive protection during the breeding season, the species is unprotected by South

American governmental entities and while in international waters. Prior to the 1980s, persecution by humans (trapping for food) on the wintering grounds may have affected Roseates nesting in the northeast. Major wintering areas for this population have not been identified; this, along with investigation of current threats on the wintering grounds, is badly needed.

**CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT:** Colonies are protected by posting of signs, by presence of wardens, and/or by exclusion of visitors. Wooden nest boxes and boards, partially buried tires, and other structures enhance the number of potential nest sites. Vegetation control is sometimes necessary when plant growth is dense enough to actually impede adults' ability to access nesting sites. The gradual loss of breeding sites in the Northeast, coupled with the Roseate's reluctance to colonize new sites, is a serious obstacle to recovery of the northeast population. The current overwhelming concentration of Roseates in Massachusetts in just two colonies in Buzzards Bay (Bird and Ram Is.), despite suitable conditions elsewhere, does not bode well for the population should one of these sites become unsuitable. Because of the regional importance of Massachusetts for Roseate recovery, several restoration projects have been initiated in the state. Restoring Common Terns to nesting sites is a necessary first step in restoring Roseates because of the Roseate's close association with the Common Tern at breeding colonies. Roseates were successfully restored to Ram I. after a gull control program in 1990-1991. A similar program at Monomoy NWR, begun in 1996, encouraged the expansion of a huge colony of Common Terns (9,747 pairs in 2005), but only a handful of Roseates nest there. Two other tern restoration projects -- at Penikese I., in Buzzards Bay, and at Muskeget I., in Nantucket Sound -- are currently underway, both involving aggressive discouragement of gulls from small portions of the islands; Roseates returned to Penikese in 2003, but numbers have fluctuated widely since then. Tern restoration is a long-term commitment that requires annual monitoring and management to track progress, identify threats, manage vegetation, prevent gulls from encroaching on colonies, and remove predators.



**Figure 2. Roseate Tern population trends in Massachusetts, 1880s to 2006 (modified from Blodget and Melvin 1996).**

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