

The 1973 Tern Season on Cape Cod, Massachusetts

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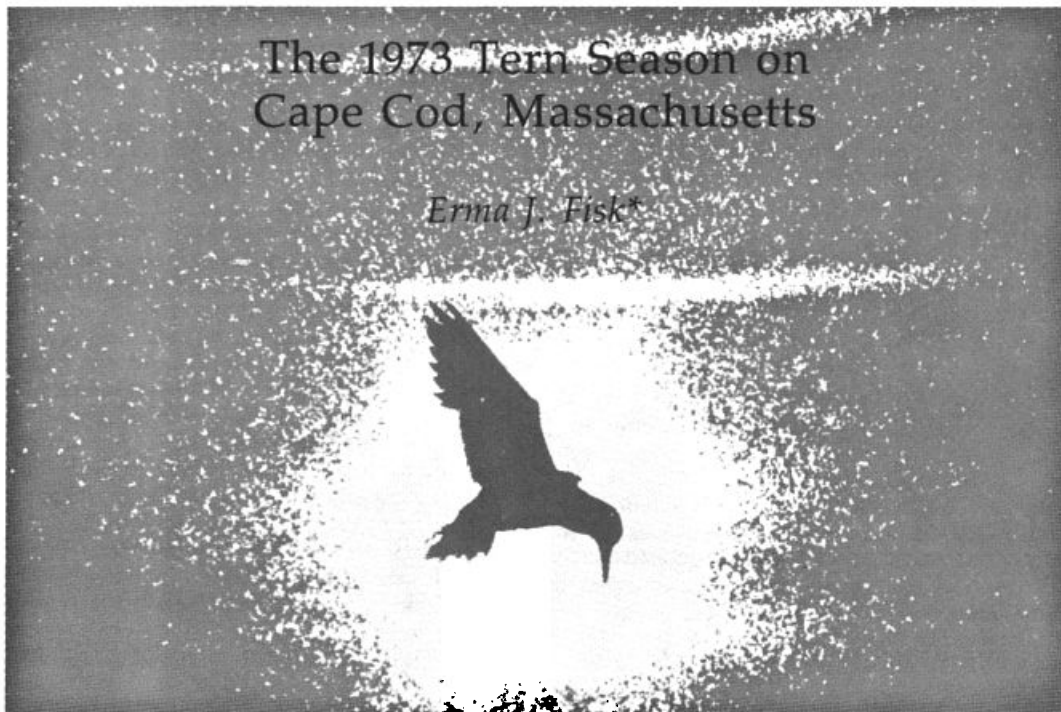


Photo / Andrew Rakoczy from N.A.S.

Terns, those slim, airy white birds that fly our outer beaches, heads down, diving for baitfish, are fighting a losing battle against contracting nesting territories, absence of food and human disturbance. Posting of the Cape colonies by Massachusetts Audubon Society, and this year by the Cape Cod National Seashore, has given them protection to some extent from vehicles, picnickers, dogs and beachwalkers. It has also provided the added bonus of permitting dune grass to grow in these fragile areas where previously it had been run over or trampled.

The following is a report on the tern colonies of Cape Cod compiled from data supplied by Dr. Ian C.T. Nisbet and Jay Loughlin (1973 Tern Warden) of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Mrs. Lucian Rowell, president of the Cape Cod Bird Club, Richard L. Cunningham of the National Seashore, Charles Schmidt and the author. National Seashore colonies were mapped and censused by Rowell and Fisk, with the cooperation of the Seashore. With the exception of Harding's Beach in Chatham, where detailed study was carried out by Nisbet, Least Tern numbers and production could not be accurately estimated owing to the scattered nesting habits of this species and their constant shifting and re-nesting when disturbed. An average of numbers seen from early June through July is used.

MONOMOY (Nisbet)

COMMON TERN: 2100 pairs, producing about 1.7 young per pair.

ROSEATE TERN: 200-250 pairs, producing about 1 young per pair.

ARCTIC TERN: 4 pairs, 2 chicks found.

LEAST TERN: A few late nesters at Inward Point in July.

GREY'S BEACH, YARMOUTH (Nisbet)

COMMON TERN: 2000 pair, producing 0.4 young per pair.

ROSEATE TERN: 300-400 pair; no figures on success at time of writing. Roseates nest in vegetation where eggs and chicks are well concealed so that production is difficult to estimate.

This colony was increased in mid-June by birds from the long-standing Plymouth Beach colony which was totally abandoned this year due to nest predation by rats. The torrid heat of July 8-9 killed a large percentage of the half-grown birds, but brooding of small young by the adults, who flew ceaselessly to water to wet and cool their belly feathers, largely saved this group. However, a Great Horned Owl (or owls) ate two thirds

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of the chicks that would have been raised, and so disturbed the adults that they abandoned the colony every night.

Grey's Beach receives little human disturbance; it is an important colony with ideal habitat and should be carefully protected.

TERN ISLAND (Nisbet)

COMMON TERN: 75 pairs; one chick raised in July.

ARCTIC TERN: 33 nests; no chicks.

LEAST TERN: 6 pairs settled in mid-July; no data.

Famous as a tern colony since the 1920s, thoroughly studied by the Austins for 30 years, once supporting 8000 pairs, Tern Island has been increasingly relieved of gull predation but is now subjected to the more serious depredations of Great Horned Owls and possibly a weasel. In July of this year the colony was abandoned due to such predation, Commons and Arctics moving to Monomoy.

WEST DENNIS BEACH (Nisbet, Fisk)

COMMON TERN: 20 pairs in early June; same number reneating in late June. In mid-July many eggs were found broken; Gull, dog and animal tracks indicated predation. The area is subjected to heavy human disturbance in the tourist season.

LEAST TERN: 85 pairs nesting in mid-June. Six chicks seen in mid-July; probably more hiding in grass.

JEREMY POINT, GREAT ISLAND, NATIONAL SEASHORE (Rowell, Fisk)

COMMON TERN: 150 nests on June 6, mostly in low-lying areas of sparse dune grass and in wrack. 155 nests on July 2, many with pipping young. Some flying young on the beach; 100 small to medium-sized young banded. 170 nests on July 19. This increase presumably due to birds displaced elsewhere (Plymouth?) and re-nesting. Unfortunately such late nesting of this species is unproductive as the adults desert the colony, taking off for the south before the young are independent. Aug. 16: More than 50 almost-flying young; 200+ birds on beach.

ROSEATE TERN: A few adults seen, 5 chicks found.

PILGRIM HEIGHTS BEACH (Rowell, Fisk, Schmidt)

COMMON TERN: 2 pairs nesting; no data.

ROSEATE TERN: 4 pairs nesting; no data.

LEAST TERN: 150 nests over a mile-long

stretch. Schmidt reports the colony as generally successful; 15 young from freshly-hatched to flying, and 11 nests counted in mid-July. Aug. 13-19: flying least young, 7 chicks counted; 2 birds incubating.

RACE POINT BEACH, NATIONAL SEASHORE (Rowell, Fisk)

COMMON TERN: 1 nest in mid-July.

ARCTIC TERN: 4 nests in mid-July.

LEAST TERN: A surprisingly successful colony of more than 30 pairs immediately adjacent to the camping site, extending perhaps a quarter of a mile. 25 young and up to 10 small young seen in mid-July. As of July 29 Least were still nesting or reneating. This colony is subject to high water, human disturbance and dogs. Aug 13: 8 flying young. 3 just hatched, 5 larger chicks, 2 birds incubating

MARCONI BEACH, NATIONAL SEASHORE (Rowell, Cunningham, Fisk)

LEAST TERN: 8 nests early in the season with some washout from high water. One nest with eggs and several adults seen on the gravel slope of the bluff. Six flying young were in the area in mid-July.

COAST GUARD BEACH, SOUTH END (Rowell; Posted by Cape Cod Bird Club)

COMMON TERN: One nest, both chicks banded.

ARCTIC TERN: One definite nest, possibly 2. Two chicks from known nest banded July 9, at least 1 surviving July 30.

LEAST TERN: Up to 25 pairs nesting and reneating from late May-Aug. 1. Production apparently fair to good, with heavy grass behind the snow fence affording protection. Chicks of varying sizes were seen in July; 17 flying young and 3 small young were counted July 25. 37 chicks were banded. No birds picked up dead after the heat wave of July 8-9 had bands. One banded chick was found run over in a vehicle rut. One incubating bird Aug 13; 12-15 adults, some with fish at colony Aug 17. 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ grown young banded.

NEW ISLAND, NAUSET HARBOR, NATIONAL SEASHORE (Nisbet, Fisk, Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 300 pairs. Over 50 flying chicks seen in mid-July, many half grown still in thick dune grass. 71 chicks banded.

ROSEATE TERN: 10 pairs. 2 chicks banded

ARCTIC TERN: 7 pairs; 1 flying young seen in mid-July. Birds nesting in the lower grass hummocks and in wrack on the marsh side were wiped out by high water, probably pre-

dated by gulls and were renesting in mid-July (see note on Jeremy Point). This island is accessible only by boat, offers excellent terrain and merits careful protection.

NORTH BEACH, SOUTH OF NAUSET INLET (Fisk, Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 10 pairs nesting in early June; 2 pairs in mid-July (up from 1 pair in 1970, 2 in 1971 and 5 in 1972). The growth of dune grass planted by the town is attractive to this species, but crowds out the open-space-loving Least Tern.

ARCTIC TERN: 2 pairs (1 each year in 1970-1972).

LEAST TERN: More than 100 birds counted in early June, but production, if any, was poor. No flying young were seen in mid-July, although behavior of adults indicated the possible presence of small young in the grass. Some renesting but no adequate data. Presumed to be the largest Least Tern colony in Massachusetts two years ago, this colony this year deserted the gravelled hollow between grassy dunes for the extensive sand flats beyond where it was highly vulnerable to high water, wind and disturbance. Posting was generally respected, but the birds were very widely scattered and difficult to protect. The heat wave of July 8&9 doubtless did serious damage. No young seen first week of August.

HARDING'S BEACH (Nisbet)

LEAST TERN: 120 pairs nested in early June and almost all hatched without any of the usual problems. The territory was excellent and relatively undisturbed. However, almost all the chicks were taken by a pair of kestrels flying over from the mainland to obtain food for their young. One flying chick seen on July 29. Some signs of renesting on the same date.

CHATHAM LIGHTHOUSE BEACH (Nisbet)

LEAST TERN: 18 pairs nesting in mid-June. No information on success. The area is heavily disturbed by beach buggies, dogs and picnickers.

CRAIGVILLE BEACH (Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 150 pairs in mid-June. No data available at this time. 50 flying young, 150 adults Aug. 13.

LEAST TERN: 50 pairs in mid-June. No data available at this time.

SAMPSON/DEAD NECK ISLAND, OSTERVILLE (Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 60-70 pairs in mid-June Chicks hatching at that time but production thought to be poor. 20 flying young, 60 adults Aug. 13.

LEAST TERN: 30 pairs in mid-June. 2 chicks seen in mid-July. Production thought to be poor. Least Terns are new in this area and perhaps have moved here from Popponesset Beach colony where they have nested previously but were not found this year. 30 adults, 20 flying young, 4 or 5 incubating Aug 13.

POPPONESSETT BEACH (Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 18 adults and 4 flying chicks seen July 25.

LEAST TERN: 25 adults and 8 flying chicks seen July 25. In spite of the presence of young birds no evidence of actual nesting by either species was found. It is possible that these birds are coming from the Osterville or Craigville colonies. Fishing is good in the harbor behind Popponesset Beach. This area receives a tremendous amount of human disturbance.

SACCONESSETT BEACH, FALMOUTH (Loughlin)

LEAST TERN: 6 or 8 pairs nesting. No available data on production at this time. Area receives little disturbance since it is on private property.

NORTH SANDWICH (Loughlin)

COMMON TERN: 15 flying young seen on July 25.

LEAST TERN: 20 flying young seen on July 25. This colony has been posted by the Sandwich Conservation Commission. A large number of adults were thought to be nesting in June and it is possible that this colony has received some of the Plymouth Beach terns

SANDY NECK (Taisto Ranta, Conservation Officer, Town of Barnstable)

COMMON TERN: About 25 pairs nesting near the tide line; considerable washout but persistent pairs did get some young off.

LEAST TERN: About 50 pairs scattered along the inside of the Neck; a few flying young observed in mid-July.

DUXBURY BEACH [Not on Cape Cod] (Loughlin)

LEAST TERN: About 20 pairs seen during the second week in June scattered along a ¾-mile stretch of gravel. Eight flying young seen on July 26.