



# Black Tern Facts



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## Identification

Black terns are slender, graceful fliers with long pointed wings. They are often associated with coastal environments, but the black tern is found inland. During the breeding season this bird is relatively easy to identify because it is the only all black tern. In the fall, juveniles and molting adults have black and white mottled plumages. Flashing light under-wing linings make the black tern especially conspicuous in flight.

## Life History

In early May, black terns begin their courtship displays at communal feeding and resting areas. Mating pairs are established by mid-May when they disperse to nesting areas in typically large “hemi-marshes”. Nest-site selection and nest-building are rapid, taking only four days. The shallow, cup-like nests are built upon floating materials of matted, dead marsh vegetation, old muskrat houses, cattail root stalks, emerging plants, algae, or fallen logs. Black terns have one brood of 2-4 eggs; both parents attend the nest and continually add nesting materials during the 21-day incubation period. Within two days of hatching, the chicks can swim, walk and run. They fledge in 21-24 days after hatching.

Black terns inhabit freshwater marshes and lakes.

They eat fish and insects, foraging by plucking prey from the water’s surface, and by capturing insects in flight.



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## Range

The black tern is a semi-colonial waterbird that nests on inland marshes, ponds, mouths of rivers and shores of large lakes. In the North America, their breeding range covers most of the northern states and into Canada. The black tern winters in marine and coastal areas of Central America and northern South America.

Today, approximately 200 nesting pairs occur at less than 20 of this bird’s historic breeding grounds.



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## Status

Beginning in the 1960s, the black tern population in New York declined across its range. In the 1960s, a series of dams in the St. Lawrence River were erected to generate hydropower, stabilize Lake Ontario water levels. These dams limited the annual fluctuation of water levels that promoted the hemi-marsh conditions favored by nesting black terns, and resulted in a loss of breeding habitat. At Montezuma, management of high water levels to keep the invasive purple loosestrife at bay compromised black tern habitat and their presence on the refuge declined.

Today, purple loosestrife infestation is under control with the use of *Galerucella* beetles, and water management now favors conditions suitable for black tern habitat. In the 2013 annual black tern survey, staff and volunteers counted 101 black terns, assuming 50 breeding pairs present.

## Interesting Facts

- The Black tern is very social. It breeds in loose colonies and usually forages, roosts, and migrates in flocks of a few to more than 100 birds, occasionally up to tens of thousands.
- The male performs a display flight where he carries a small fish or dragonfly in view of potential mates. A female that accepts the invitation follows him to a perch where he feeds her the prize.
- Black terns are semi-colonial nesters and only defend a small territory a few feet around the nest. Nests may be as close as 1 yard apart, but more typically they are 15 to 60 feet apart, in clusters of 10 to 50 nests.
- A group of terns are collectively known as a "ternery" or a "U" of terns.



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