

Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*



Folk Name: Big Sea Striker

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Casual

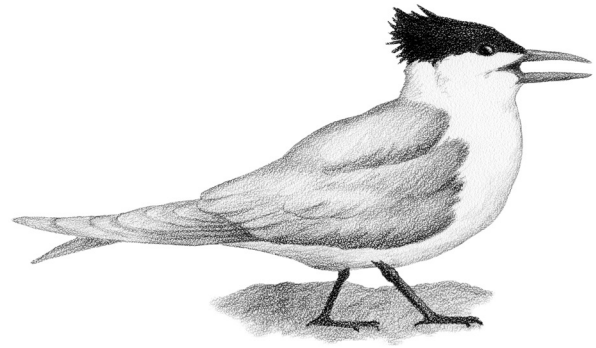
Habitat: Open water, lake edge

“Darting and swaying and screaming—
Ever a weaving maze;
Filling the air with their clamor—
Sounding a Hymn of Praise;
For here’s where the Royal Tern’s at home
On shell-scattered isle mid ocean’s foam.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, September 26, 1909

The Royal Tern is a wide-ranging bird of both the southern Atlantic and Pacific coasts. At 20 inches, it is the second largest tern found in the Carolinas. It is found year-round along the coast of both states, although it is less common in winter when most birds have dispersed to the south.

Breeding colonies have been documented in both Carolinas. These nesting colonies are usually found in isolated and precarious spots on barrier islands and sandy spits. These spots are subject to destruction by various high tides and storm events. Breeding success can be good one year and very poor the next. T.G. Pearson shared one example of this on Royal Shoal Island, NC, in June 1907: “a high storm tide swept one end of the island, carrying with it into the Sound about 15,000 eggs, mostly of the Royal Tern.” Nestlings banded at nest colonies in the Carolinas have been found wintering in Georgia, Florida (both coasts), the West Indies (Dominican Republic),



Colombia, and as far away as Peru. One bird banded as a nestling in Beaufort, North Carolina, was found on North Topsail Beach 21 years later.

One *Chat* editor noted: “This species is extremely rare away from salt water and inland records are usually due to storm transport.” Indeed, all of our records are believed to be related to storm activity. Flo and Bill Cobey reported the first Royal Terns in the Central Carolinas. They observed “10 or 12 over Lake Wylie in SW corner of Mecklenburg County” on September 25, 1965.

Allen Bryan found seven in Cleveland County that were forced inland by Hurricane Hugo on September 22, 1989. David Wright found one on Lake Norman that remained at least a day before heading back to the ocean. Wright discovered two more at the Cowan’s Ford Dam the following month on 27 October. Taylor Piephoff provided the last record of Royal Tern sighted in this region. He found a bird on Lake Norman on May 15, 1990.