

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Open water, lake edge

The Black Tern is an unusual tern species that breeds in freshwater wetlands scattered throughout the upper Midwest and Canada. Each year, these birds disperse from their breeding grounds, move through inland states to coastal areas, and then move south to wintering sites in Central and South America. At just under 10 inches, this tern is the smallest member of the gull and tern family that regularly visits the Central Carolinas.

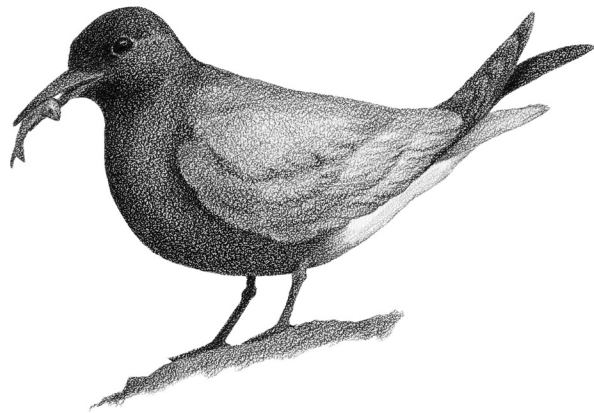
The Black Tern has a dark back, dark tail, and dark gray wings in all plumages, but its body is black in breeding plumage and mostly white in non-breeding plumage. Many observations are of birds in a mottled or “in-between” plumage. These terns can be found foraging anywhere in the region with open water habitat. Unlike our other terns, they feed on insects as well as fish.

The Black Tern is almost always reported here during its fall migration in the months of August and September. We have no records of Black Tern in the region from October through April, and none have been reported in the month of June. We have only two records of spring migrants. Birders conducting the Charlotte Spring Bird Count found one on May 6, 1961. Phil and Jan Fowler photographed an adult in breeding plumage at the Concord Mills Mall pond in Cabarrus County on May 21, 2016.

We have three records of early migrants arriving in the month of July. David Wright sighted a Black Tern at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville on July 25, 1985. The bird was in full adult plumage except for a patch of white on the hind neck that was still evident. He watched several



Black Tern in Cabarrus County. (Phil Fowler)



Barn Swallows actively harass this larger bird as it foraged for insects over the drying lagoons. Lori Owenby found a group of eight “in mixed plumages” on Lookout Shoals Lake on July 16, 2005. Dwayne Martin found a pair feeding on Lake Hickory on July 20, 2015.

There are many records of Black Terns in the region in the twentieth century. The earliest dated mention of this species here was on August 11, 1920. Members of the “Nature Fakirs Club,” sponsored by the YMCA in Salisbury, reported observing Black Terns and other birds on an expedition west of town while they were securing specimens for their butterfly collections. Dr. D.T. Smith collected the first specimens of Black Tern in the upper Piedmont of South Carolina in the 1920s after the construction of several large lake impoundments. Larry Crawford counted a total of 10 Black Terns during a survey conducted on High Rock Lake between July 26 and August 15, 1948. H. Lee Jones and Julian Meadows sighted one along the Catawba River in Charlotte on September 4, 1960. Allen Bryan had nine in Shelby on September 22, 1989, after Hurricane Hugo moved through. David Wright found a single Black Tern on Lake Norman on the same day, and Harry LeGrand counted a total of five on the lake the following day. Dwayne Martin counted a flock of 15 on Lookout Shoals Lake on August 16, 1998, and a flock of 14 on the lake on August 24, 1999. Lori Owenby had another 21 on Lake Hickory that same day.

Black Terns have been seen almost annually along the Catawba River corridor since 2000. Dates range from 3 August through 25 September. The largest single flock counted in this time period is a group of 35 flying over Lake Norman, reported by Derb Carter and David and Marcia Wright on September 15, 2008.

The authors of *The State of the Birds 2014 Report* for North America warn that the breeding population of the Black Tern is in steep decline.