



**Common Name:** GULL-BILLED TERN

**Scientific Name:** *Gelochelidon nilotica* Gmelin

**Other Commonly Used Names:** Marsh tern

**Previously Used Names:** *Sterna nilotica*

**Family:** Laridae

**Rarity Ranks:** G5/S1

**State Legal Status:** Threatened

**Federal Legal Status:** Not listed

**Federal Wetland Status:** N/A

**Description:** This bird is a medium-sized tern 35-36 cm long (14 in). Its face and underparts are white and it has a black cap that extends from the base of the bill to the nape of the neck. The bill and legs are black. The back, upper wings, and upper tail are light gray. The bill is relatively thick or heavy for a tern. Unlike other terns that plunge into the ocean or inland waters to catch small fish, the gull-billed tern feeds primarily over dunes, marshes, mudflats, and coastal scrub vegetation.

**Similar Species:** During the breeding season in Georgia the sandwich tern is the most similar species in both size and appearance. It has a very pale gray back, upper wings, and upper tail and its bill is thin and has a pale (usually yellow) tip. The thin bill with its light colored tip is by far the easiest way to differentiate the sandwich tern from the gull-billed tern. The royal tern, while similar in overall appearance, is significantly larger (51 cm; 20 in) than the gull-bill and has a bright orange bill. The least tern is significantly smaller at about 23 cm (9 in) in length and has a yellow bill during the breeding season.

**Habitat:** This bird nests on exposed sand beaches, sand spit islands, and dredge spoil sites. It feeds over dunes, marshes, mudflats, and coastal scrub.

**Diet:** Insects, crabs, crayfish, lizards, small mammals, amphibians, fish, and occasionally nestling birds, particularly chicks of other tern species.

**Life History:** In Georgia these terns arrive from wintering areas in April and initiate breeding in early to mid-May when pairs can be seen courting on the beach, the males strutting about with prey hanging from their bills. The nest is a simple scrape in the sand, sometimes lined with shell fragments and dead cordgrass or other grass-like vegetation. The female lays 1-3 eggs that are incubated for 22–23 days. Both parents share incubation duties with the female apparently doing more. The downy, cream-colored chicks leave the nest within a few days of hatching and hide by flattening out on the beach or tucking into beach vegetation. Within 28-35 days young start to fly and soon move away from their natal beach to adjacent beaches where the adults continue to feed them. Young are fed by their parents until at least the beginning of migration. Most birds depart the state by the end of August for wintering areas along the Gulf Coast and the Atlantic Coast of southern Mexico and Central America. Some may also winter in northern South America.

**Survey Recommendations:** Nesting surveys on foot or by boat to determine the number and location of nesting pairs. Aerial surveys may be effective in some areas as well, but aircraft may cause undue stress if they approach the nesting site too closely. High-resolution digital photographs taken from a safe distance may be the best way to count and document nesting colonies from the air. While Gull-bills can be found nesting as isolated pairs or with Least Terns, the species is most commonly found imbedded in Black Skimmer colonies on open sand terraces of remote beaches and sand spit islands.

**Range:** Breeding distribution includes areas of North and South America, Europe, Asia, northern Africa, and Australia. In North America this bird breeds along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from New Jersey to central Mexico, on the northwestern Pacific coast of Mexico, and in the Bahamas. Inland breeding populations occur in south-central Florida and at the Salton Sea in southern California. Gull-billed Terns can be seen anywhere on the Georgia coast from early April through September but are most common near extensive mud and sand flats close to barrier island beaches. Islands and sand spits associated with the Altamaha River estuary (Sapelo, Wolf, and Little St. Simons Islands and Little Egg Island Bar) are generally the best places to find them. This bird often follows coastal rivers inland while feeding and is regularly seen at the Butler Island tract of the Altamaha WMA in McIntosh County. Nesting was first recorded in Georgia in 1926 on Oysterbed Island at the mouth of the Savannah River. In recent decades

nesting has been documented on Ossabaw Island, Pelican Spit (Glynn County), Crab Island (a dredge spoil site at Kings Bay Submarine Base), and Cumberland Island. This species has nested every year since 1993 on Little Egg Island Bar at the mouth of the Altamaha River and in 2005 and 2006 on the dredge spoil flats of Andrews Island near Brunswick.

**Threats:** Increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic on beaches and associated areas where this species nests is the biggest threat. Long-term sea level rise may eventually lead to a reduction in nesting habitat.

**Georgia Conservation Status:** Recent nesting on St. Catherines Island Bar, Liberty County, Little St. Simons Island, Andrews Island dredge material site, Brunswick Channel dredge spoil island, and Little Egg Island Bar. Little Egg Island Bar has been the most important nesting location in Georgia over the last two decades.

**Conservation and Management Recommendations:** Gull-billed tern populations were greatly reduced by shooting for the millinery (hat making) trade at the turn of the 20th century. Since receiving legal protection, populations have rebounded, although probably not to the levels that preceded this persecution. In Georgia, six surveys on Little Egg Island Bar between 1993 and 2005 yielded an average of 65 pairs (high; 100 pairs; low; 43 pairs). Colonies of this size are typical for the Atlantic seaboard. The greatest conservation concern in Georgia today is human disturbance at nesting sites. Growth of the human population along the coast has led to increased use of isolated beaches and sand spits by people. Vehicles, people, and pets can run over or step on eggs or young, crushing them. Unrestrained dogs will often eat eggs, kill young, or chase young or adult terns. Repeated disturbance can interfere with feeding, brood rearing, and other activities leading to reduced survival and can also result in abandonment of nesting colonies. In 1998, the DNR Board put into effect the “Bird Island Rule” which limits access to five small but important sand spit islands, thereby protecting nesting and roosting seabirds and shorebirds. The Army Corp of Engineers, working with the Nongame Conservation Section of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, created a new dredge island in St. Simons Island Sound. This 14-acre site supported the only successful Gull-billed Tern nesting in Georgia during 2009, with many fledging young observed in July and August.

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**Authors of Species Account:** Bradford Winn and Todd M. Schneider

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