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Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*

The Roseate Tern is strictly a coastal species in Florida and frequently associates with *Royal Terns*. It breeds locally from Maine and Nova Scotia south to North Carolina, in many Caribbean locations, and Honduras.

Habitat. Roseate Terns nest in colonies, sometimes with other terns. The nest is a hollow scrape usually located in scant vegetation, but sometimes on bare sand. The nest is usually unlined. Two or 3 eggs comprise a clutch, but it has been suggested that 3-egg clutches may be the result of egg dumping (Norton 1988). The eggs are highly variable in color with background ranging from light cream to buff or, rarely, deep olive. The markings are equally variable, consisting of scrawls, spots, speckles, and blotches of black, brown, or gray. The eggs are laid at 2- to 3-day intervals and take 21 to 26 days to hatch. The young are semiprecocial and fledge at 27 to 30 days of age.

The diet of the Roseate Tern is composed principally of small fish, which it captures by plunge-diving.



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Seasonal Occurrence. The Roseate Tern is a breeding summer resident in parts of the Florida Keys and a spring and fall migrant off the rest of south Florida. Egg dates range from 26 May to 9 July.

Status. The Roseate Tern is a Threatened species in Florida because of its limited range, small population, and poor nesting success in recent years. This designation applies to the entire Caribbean population (Wood 1991). In the early nineteenth century this species nested in the Keys; however, by the early twentieth century colonies were located only on the Dry Tortugas (Robertson 1964). The Tortugas colony has disappeared, and nesting has shifted back to the lower Keys. In 1962 colonies were found off Seven-mile Bridge and Crawl Key (Robertson 1978d).

In 1985 Roseate Terns were nesting in Florida only on dredged-material islands in the lower Keys, at Indian Key (42 pairs), Grassy Key (65 pairs), and Key West (263 pairs) (Kushlan and White 1985). Atlas data show that nesting continued in Key West and in 3 blocks of the Marathon Quadrangle, one of which is Vaca Rock.

This species also nests on rooftops in the Keys. One of the colonies in the Marathon Quadrangle was on the roof of the Casa Cayo condominium complex near Fanny Keys. The history of roof nesting by Roseate Terns in Florida may go back to 1969, when a colony of terns bred on the Zayre building at Pompano Beach, in Broward County. The birds were reported as Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) (McGowan 1969), but it has been suggested that these were probably Roseate Terns (Fisk 1978). Robertson (1964) has also suggested that early reports of nesting Common Terns in the Dry Tortugas were misidentified Roseate Terns. Roseate Terns have nested on roofs in Key West since the 1970s (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Another colony, discovered in 1987 and still present in 1991, is on Pelican Shoals, 8 km (5 mi) southeast of the Boca Chica Naval Air Station.

It is clear that the Roseate Tern's status as a Threatened species in Florida is justified. With only 350 pairs nesting in just 3 colonies, prospects for the species are not bright, given the development pressures in the Keys. At the same time, the Roseate Tern has benefited from the construction of dredged-material islands and grave

rooftops.

Robert W. Loftin

Roseate Tern

