

Successful Breeding Common Terns in Illinois:

With A Summary of Common Tern Nesting Occurrences in Illinois

by Donald R. Dann



Common Tern in flight near its nesting grounds in Lake County. 25 May 1995. Photo by Eric Walters.

When I decided to pursue a second career in conservation, one of the first requests I received was from Amy Horstmann of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. "How would you like to monitor what is probably the only breeding colony of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) in the state?" she asked. In the early spring of 1997, Horstmann and I met at the Commonwealth Edison Waukegan coal-fired power plant, where the birds had previously nested.

Joining us from ComEd was Tom Platt, the compliance specialist. Tom took us to the "fly-ash ponds", on the property's south end. Here, ash from the burned coal is slurried into two large ponds for settling and eventual dredging and disposal. In the center of both ponds is a narrow peninsula at the end of which is a circular island, approximately 15 meters in diameter. It was on these islands where the terns, which are endangered in Illinois, had nested, with mixed success, in prior years. See Appendix for de-

tails. Since the ponds are dredged in alternate years, our focus (and hopefully the terns?) was the island in the pond fully surrounded by water where no dredging activity occurred.

ComEd helped creating suitable conditions for the birds by building a 1.5-meter electrified cyclone fence around the periphery of each island. ComEd also created a surface of crushed stone to simulate the sandy or rock substrate of the tern's preferred nesting habitat (Ehrlich, et al), and left some sparse vegetation, which terns like to provide shade for the chicks.

On 16 May 1997, I counted 22 birds and observed classic tern nesting behavior; males prancing about with their struts and waddles, flying in from the lake carrying minnows and ritually feeding females, and competing with other males attempting to do the same. Birds were seen hunkered down (apparently females), on what appeared to be their scrape nests. Some nesting attempts seemed to be

occurring on the stone just outside the enclosure, which at the time made me more than a little nervous. (Events proved my anxiety well-justified). I made similar observations over the next few weeks, counting as many as 27 birds on one occasion.

Then disaster struck. The third week of June, I found the island empty. Every tern was gone, nowhere to be seen. What happened? Horstmann and I conjectured several possibilities. Perhaps the electric fence was not working, or maybe a raccoon had dug underneath it to reach the birds. Or perhaps a predator had struck a nesting bird outside the fence, which caused the entire colony to abandon the island.

The following April, 1998, Horstmann and I again met with Tom Platt, who helped improve the fence's security, and extend fencing material underground at an angle to deter predators. The contour of the land outside the fence was configured to deter nesting there. Plastic matting was installed under the stone with holes in only a few places to allow the right amount of plant material to grow.

On my first observation, 15 May 1998, I found no birds. On 22 May 1998, I found 2 Common Terns, one on an apparent nest inside the fence and the other flying in from the east carrying food. On 27 May 1998, I found 7 birds, and on 7 June, I saw 12 Common Terns!

As the weeks progressed the numbers continued to increase but so did the difficulty of getting an exact count. I did my studies with a scope from a road running along the south end of the pond, at least 100 meters from