

The Status of the Common Tern in Illinois: with comments on recent conservation efforts at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, Lake County

by Donald R. Dann

The Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) is a state-listed endangered species in Illinois and of special concern throughout its range. Available historic nesting records in Illinois from 1975 through 2002, show that in only six of the 28 years have birds successfully fledged young (Table 1). There were no confirmed nesting attempts in Illinois between 1985 and 1996. This species faces continued obstacles to its continued presence in the state. Successful nesting in the limited habitat will require intensive management efforts to prevent this species from being extirpated from Illinois.

Common Terns prefer nesting in sparsely vegetated areas on sand or gravel on dunes, banks, salt marshes, rocky islets or lake shores (Waters 1994). Due to extensive development of the Lake Michigan shoreline, suitable nesting habitat free of human or animal disturbances is mostly absent, with the exception of a few locations in and near Waukegan, Lake County, Illinois.

The fly ash settling ponds of the Waukegan Midwest Generation (formerly Commonwealth Edison) coal power plant proved ideal habitat for the Common Tern, which used this site to nest for many of the past 16 years (Table 1). The most successful recent year in that period

was in 1998 when seven fledglings were confirmed (Dann and Kruse 1999). Ironically, in the following year a pair of Peregrine Falcons (federally listed as threatened at the time) also nested at this location. Their predation on adult terns nesting at the site resulted in abandonment of the colony.

Great Lakes Naval Training Center

In late summer of 1999 while monitoring for shorebirds on the small island at the northeast corner of the Great Lakes harbor, I noticed what appeared to be broken Common Tern eggs, indicating possible nesting attempts at this location. For the following nesting season, 2000, I resumed monitoring at this potential new nesting site, and observed good numbers of Common Terns engaged in nest-building behaviors. However, in mid-June of

that year, all located nests had been destroyed, either by mammalian predators or by pedestrian traffic. After surveying the site with Brad Semel, a Natural Heritage Biologist with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, we concluded that nesting success could only be achieved by fencing off the island from the peninsula to the west.

The next step was getting cooperation from the U. S. Navy to manage the site specifically for a Common Tern nesting colony. We contacted Bob VanBendegom of the environmental department at Great Lakes and explained the uniqueness of the location and the endangered Common Terns that use it. We also explained how shorebirds, many of which are also in population decline, have used this site for many years during migration for resting and feeding. Continued human intrusion lessened significantly the

Donald Dann and Brad Semel work to manage the land near where Common Terns nest. Here they prepare to remove the non-native purple loosestrife.
Photo by Jackie Dann.

