

# Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii dougallii*



**Family:** Laridae  
**Order:** Charadriiformes

## Description

The roseate tern is a medium-sized sea bird. Its underside, neck, and tail (which is long and bifurcate) are white. Its back and wings, on the other hand, are light gray. The roseate tern also has a small cap of black feathers on its head. The legs are coral red, but turn dark red during winter. The beak is coral red with a black tip during breeding season, but turns black during winter. In this species, the male and the female cannot be told apart by eyesight. Juveniles are very different from adults, as their feathers have brown splotches, the beak is brown, and the legs are dark gray.

## Biological Information

### Reproducción

The roseate tern is a migratory bird, which means they do not stay in Puerto Rico. Rather, they travel to other parts of the world and returns to the island to reproduce during May through August. Females lay



Distribution

a clutch of one to three eggs, cream with brown spots, which camouflage well with the rocky, coralline ground. The eggs hatch after about 24 days. Both parents nurture, feed and tend to the hatchlings. The hatchlings depend completely on their parents for safety and food. The hatchlings grow quickly, and after four or five weeks (25 to 28 days) of hatching, they are ready to fly. Nonetheless, they stay with their parents of several months after leaving the nest, while they learn to hunt.

### Habitat

The roseate tern likes nesting on cays and rocky or coralline islets far from the coast. There, the mating pair selects an area in which to make their nest, which is often just a small cavity among rocks or on the ground itself. They rarely nest in large islands.

### Diet

This species obtains their food through quick dives into the sea. Their diet is rich in proteins. It mostly feeds on small fish such as sardines and anchovies.

### Distribution

The roseate tern is found mostly on the northern hemisphere, along the northeast coast of the United States. They can migrate from Nova Scotia through Brazil. In Puerto Rico, roseate tern nesting sites have been reported in the cays and islets near Lajas, Manatí, Barceloneta, Guayanilla, Culebra and Vieques. Since 2005, surveys about the amount of individuals nesting in Puerto Rico's cays and islets fluctuates around 2,000.

## Threats

During their breeding season, the roseate tern faces a variety of threats, which affect their nests, eggs, hatchlings and even the adults, whether directly or indirectly. For instance, other marine birds such as

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the oystercatcher and the turnstone, can depredate on the roseate tern's eggs, and hermit crabs depredate the hatchlings. Other factors affecting the roseate tern are human interference in nesting areas, egg harvesting, the slaughter of adults during migration, and pollution. The consequences of climate change, such as an increase in sea level, is also a threat since it may eventually reduce and even eliminate the nesting areas preferred by the roseate tern.

## Conservation Measures

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The roseate tern was included in the Endangered Species list in 1987. So as to preserve and evaluate the population's status, an annual survey is performed during the breeding seasons. These surveys provide information about the specific places in which the roseate terns nest, how many breeding pairs are there, how many eggs are laid throughout the season, and the success rate of the eggs.

The Endangered Species Act, amended in 1973, prohibits the killing, harassing, trapping, purchasing or selling any species, as well as parts and products derived from the species, which is listed as endangered.

## References

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- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2010, Caribbean Roseate Tern and North Atlantic Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougallii dougallii*) 5-Year Review Summary and Evaluation.
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## Additional Information

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