

ALEUTIAN TERN *Onychoprion aleutica*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: Moderate

N. AMERICAN: High Concern

GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
May-Aug	1-3	20-29 d	25-31 d	depression in vegetation	pursuit high dive	fish, invertebrates, insects

Life History and Distribution

The Aleutian Tern (*Onychoprion*) *aleutica* breeds only in Alaska and eastern Siberia. It nests in coastal colonies that are distributed over a wide range. In Alaska, it frequently associates with Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) on the breeding grounds. The two species are very similar in appearance and may be difficult to differentiate. Both have a black cap, but the Aleutian has a white forehead. During the breeding season, the Arctic Tern has a bright red bill, feet and legs while the Aleutian's are black.

Until recently, the Aleutian Tern was placed in the large genus *Sterna* which included most terns. In 2006, the American Ornithologists' Union reclassified this species based on genetic sequence comparisons. It is now in the genus *Onychoprion* which includes three other "brown-backed" tern species.

Nesting occurs in a variety of habitats (e.g. islands, shrub-tundra, grass or sedge meadows, and freshwater and coastal marshes). The nest is generally a depression in short or matted vegetation and nests are widely scattered in the colony.

The primary diet consists of small fish which are caught in a variety of ways. The tern may search for fish from the air and swoop down to pick them from the surface, hover and dive to shallow depths, or sit on the surface and dip. They are skilled fliers and can take insects out of the air while flying.

In Alaska, Aleutian Tern colonies are located along the coast of the Chukchi Sea as far north as Kasegaluk Lagoon, on the Seward Peninsula, the Yukon-Kuskokwim River delta, and along the Alaska Peninsula. They are also found in widely scattered locations in the Aleutian Islands, Kodiak Archipelago, Kenai Peninsula, Copper River delta, and along the Gulf of Alaska as far east as Dry Bay. Colonies often shift from year to year and nesting sites in the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas are not occupied every year.

Breeding colonies located in Siberia are on Sakhalin Island, the Kamchatka Peninsula, in the Sea of Okhotsk, and in the Bering Sea at Olyutorskiy Bay and Karagin Island.

The winter range of the Aleutian Tern is mostly unknown. However, observations of this species in the coastal waters around Hong Kong in spring and fall, and Singapore and the Indonesian islands of Karimun and Bintan between October and April, indicate that at least



part of the population migrates through and winters in these areas. Observations during December 1997 suggest that the coastal waters of Java, Bali, and Sulawesi may also be part of the winter range.

Alaska Seasonal Distribution

AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern	+	+	-	-
Southcoastal *	U	U	U	-
Southwestern *	U	U	U	-
Central	-	-	-	-
Western *	U	U	U	-
Northern *	-	+	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.

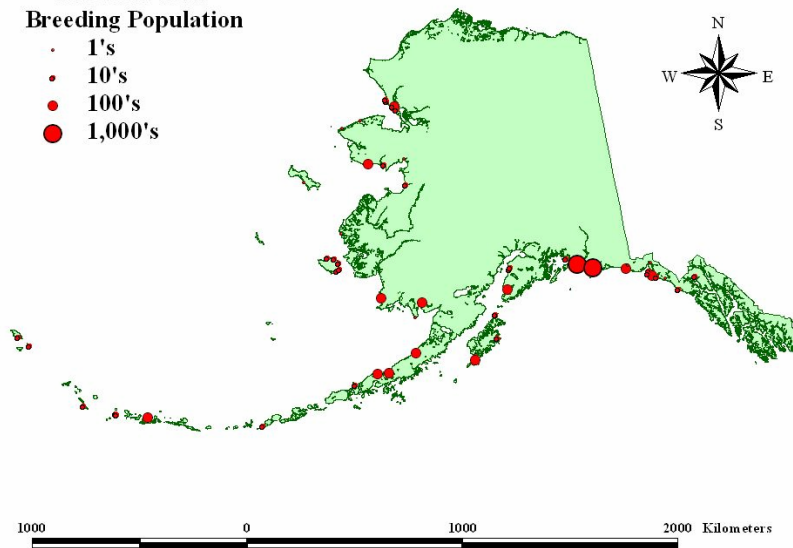
Population Estimates and Trends

The world population is between 17,000-20,000 individuals. The breeding population estimate for Alaska is 9,500 birds.

On the south and east side of Kodiak Island, Alaska, Aleutian Terns have declined from 1,559 individuals in the late 1970s to two birds in 2002. Because terns are known to shift nesting locations between years, trends are difficult to evaluate. Some colonies could have relocated and birds may be nesting inland. An extensive survey must be conducted to confidently interpret a true decline. Nonetheless, the data are consistent with surveys of tern colonies in Prince William Sound, where population

Aleutian Tern Breeding Population

- 1's
- 10's
- 100's
- 1,000's



Seabird breeding population maps created from data provided by the Beringian Seabird Colony Catalog Database. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska.

declines have also been documented based on historical data.

Neither the Alaskan nor Siberian populations are well monitored. However, both populations are thought to be declining.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

Primary causes of mortality and factors which regulate populations are predation, inclement weather during chick rearing, and human disturbance at nesting sites.

Eggs and chicks are reportedly preyed on by introduced species such as arctic (*Alopex lagopus*) and red (*Vulpes vulpes*) foxes, Norway rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), and domestic dogs. Natural predators include mink (*Mustela vison*), bears (*Ursus spp.*), and a wide variety of other bird species. Some chicks may also be killed by Arctic Terns.

There is limited information regarding response to predation, but Aleutian Terns are not as aggressive as Arctic Terns and are very sensitive to disturbance at colonies. Individuals frequently hover high over the colony if disturbed by humans. They will dive at avian predators, but often rely on the more aggressive Arctic Terns to chase intruders away.

Recommended Management Actions

- Maintain an Alaska-wide population of at least 10,000 individuals.
- Establish a monitoring program.
- Survey populations at key index locations (e.g. Port Moller Spit, Yakutat Bay, Icy Bay, Safety Lagoon, and Amchitka).
- Determine wintering locations.
- Complete a nesting inventory.
- Measure productivity.

- Determine the extent of predation and the effect on populations.
 - Continue efforts to reduce introduced predators such as foxes and rats.
 - Control domestic and feral dogs and cats near nesting colonies.
 - Determine the extent of predation by Arctic Terns, gull species, and birds of prey (especially Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus pealei*)).
- Assess and regulate human presence at nesting sites.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and wintering areas and measure contaminants in Aleutian Tern eggs.

Regional Contact

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References

Agler and Kendall 1997; American Ornithologists' Union 2006; Armstrong 1995; Hill and Bishop 1999; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; North 1997; Stephensen and Irons 2003; Stephensen *et al.* 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002.

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