

COMMON TERN

(Sterna hirundo)

Oneida Lake Status:
Common

- Migrate as far as Brazil, Ecuador & Bolivia
- Oneida Lake population has 400 nesting pairs
- Oneida Lake colony is largest inland in NYS

The common tern is the most widespread and abundant tern species in New York, and is the smallest colonial water bird on Oneida Lake. An average tern is around 15 inches long and has a wingspan of 31 inches. Common terns have a light grey back, white underbelly, deeply-forked white tail, and a glossy black cap and nape.

On Oneida Lake, common terns feed on shiners and other small fish up to four inches long, but they may also eat aquatic insects. They catch their prey during shallow dives or by skimming the water's surface as they fly over.

Common terns migrate each winter to as far away as Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia, but return to Oneida Lake in spring, where they are most often seen on low-lying rock islands such as Little Island. Because they are "threatened" in New York State, tern islands are protected to prevent disturbance.

In the early 1900's, common terns were almost extirpated in New York State by plume hunters. Protective legislation in 1918 allowed them to make a comeback in the 1920's and 1930's. Today, competition with ring-billed gulls for nest sites, human disturbances, flooding, and predation are the major reasons for low populations. Since 1979, researchers from Cornell University and the NYSDEC have recorded census data for breeding areas, and nesting success has increased as a result of the construction of gull exclosures on some tern nesting islands. Oneida Lake today sees a stable population of approximately 400 tern pairs, which primarily nest on Little Island.



Tern on Oneida Lake's little tern island (Photo credit: J Coleman)



Looking for food (Photo credit: J Coleman)



Protecting the eggs (Photo credit: J Coleman)



Common tern chick

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