

Photo of Gray-backed Tern

Seabirds

Pakalakala or Gray-backed Tern

Sterna lunata

SPECIES STATUS:

State recognized as indigenous

SPECIES INFORMATION: Breed year-round with both birds responsible for incubation and feeding. Feed mainly by plunge-diving or contact/hover-dipping. Can be inshore, offshore or pelagic feeders. Mainly consume fish such as five-horned cowfish, juvenile flyingfish, goatfish, herring, and dolphinfish, but can also eat squid, crustaceans, mollusks, and marine and terrestrial insects.

DISTRIBUTION: Currently, breeding pairs are found in the NWHI.

Map of Gray-backed Tern distribution

ABUNDANCE: Estimated population in Hawai'i includes 44,000 pairs (over 91% of the entire U.S. Pacific Island population), with the largest colonies on Lisianski, Nihoa, and Laysan.

LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT: Breed on remote islands and atolls with habitat preferences relegated to rocky ledges or sandy beaches along vegetated edges bordering open areas. On Midway and Kure, they are also known to nest on airport runways. Nests are typically shallow depressions in sand or gravel and in surf zones, making them vulnerable to storm tides.

THREATS: Populations are limited by habitat destruction, disturbance, and introduced predators (e.g. cats and rats). They are sensitive to nest disturbance and will leave their eggs, making them vulnerable to predation by Great Frigatebirds, Ruddy Turnstone, Bristle-thighed

Curlews, Laysan and Nihoa Finches. Man-made obstacles such as antenna guy wires have caused mortality in the past on Kure and Johnstone.

CONSERVATION ACTIONS: The goals of conservation actions are to not only protect current populations, but to also establish further populations to reduce the risk of extinction. In addition to common state-wide and island conservation actions, specific actions include:

- Eradicate mammalian predators from areas such as Wake, Palmyra, and islets off main Hawaiian Islands;
- Protect colonies from human disturbance

MONITORING:

- Continue surveys of population and distribution in known and likely habitats;
- Survey for presence of mammalian predators

RESEARCH PRIORITIES:

- Understanding of life history, ecology, and behavior;

References:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2005. Regional Seabird Conservation Plan, Pacific Region. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Birds and Habitat Programs, Pacific Region. Portland, Oregon.

Schreiber, E.A. et al. 2002. Gray-backed Tern (*Sterna lunata*). In the Birds of North America, No. 665 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.