

Thalasseus maximus (Royal Tern)

Family: Laridae (Gulls and Terns)

Order: Charadriiformes (Shorebirds and Waders)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Royal tern, *Thalasseus maximus*.

[<http://www.larkwire.com/library/bird-sounds/526/Royal-Tern-songs-and-calls>, downloaded 5 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Thalasseus maximus*, the royal tern, is the second-largest species of tern, after the Caspian tern. It has a long, slim orange to yellow beak, and a black elongated feathered cap on its head (Fig. 1). The royal tern has predominantly white feathers on its body, with some pale grey areas on its wings, black feet, and a slightly forked tail (Bond, 1974). It has a wingspan of 120-125cm, and a weight of 350-450g. Both male and female breeding adults have the same appearance. However, immature royal terns have mostly white foreheads, with a small crest or no crest at all.

DISTRIBUTION. *Thalasseus maximus* is found in Europe, Africa, North and South America, and the Caribbean (Fig. 2). It is an occasional visitor to Trinidad and Tobago, between the months of October to April (Arlott, 2010). Some stay in the northern countries throughout the winter, however, the few that visit Trinidad and Tobago, migrate in that time period to escape the winter season.

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. These birds are normally found close to the sea, along coastal beaches, lagoons and harbours (Arlott, 2010). In addition, they can also be found more inland, such as close to rivers and wetlands. They normally stay close to marine areas as they mostly feed on fish from the sea. However, on rare occasions, they feed more inland. They normally fly high in the sky, in small groups, sometimes following ships. Their habitat is sometimes disturbed by humans, when people come to those beaches/harbours, and may destroy their nests. These birds are diurnal in nature, active in the daytime when they can catch fish.

FOOD AND FEEDING. Their prey comprise anchovies, crabs, croakers, shrimp, and sometimes weakfish, to name a few. In addition, they also have been known to eat insects when they are more inland. They use plunge-diving as their main method of catching fish. They do this by flying high above the water, and then diving at great speed into the water, leaving a big splash. On the other hand, when hunting crabs and flying fish, shallow dives are used. Royal terns hunt by themselves, or sometimes in groups of two or three individuals (Ffrench, 2012). However, they have been seen to hunt in large groups when they are hunting large schools of fish. They normally hunt fish that are 15cm in length (Ffrench, 2012). The chicks wait for their parents to feed them when they gather in a crèche (Cornell University, 2015).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. *Thalasseus maximus* is typically found in groups or colonies, from a couple hundred, to thousands of individuals. However, when breeding, they are found in pairs, nesting closely together still as a colony (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2003). The oldest royal tern recorded was found to be 30 years old (Cornell University, 2015).

REPRODUCTION. Royal terns reproduce by laying eggs on the ground in a sandy environment. They usually start to breed at 4 years old, and they nest in colonies (National Audubon Society 2017). However, before laying occurs, courtship between adult breeding birds normally occurs (Fig. 3). This is seen whereby in the sky, the birds fly in a spiralling motion, or on the ground, the male would bring food for the female and they will both bow to each other, and strut in circles (National Audubon Society, 2017). After courtship, this is when laying of eggs occurs. Breeding normally occurs during the months of April to July, and they have been found to breed on small offshore islets off Tobago (Ffrench, 2004). These birds usually lay one egg, rarely two, per breeding season. The eggs are whitish-brown and buff, covered in black spots (Ffrench, 2012). Parent birds are normally very aggressive when protecting their eggs. When the eggs hatch, after three days, the hatchlings join older hatchlings in a group called a crèche. In the crèche, the hatchlings wait for their parents to bring them food (Fig. 4), until they are old enough to leave their parents at around 8 months old (National Audubon Society, 2017).

BEHAVIOUR. To avoid predators, royal terns prefer to nest on very small islands, on which predators are absent. If predators are present, the adults normally attack to try and scare them off,

to protect their young. When communicating with one another, they give off many different sounds, such as: “tourreee” call, “ee-ah”, a “keer” and “keerlap” shrill, high “kree” or “kgee”, and a “chirrik” sound (Restall, 2006).

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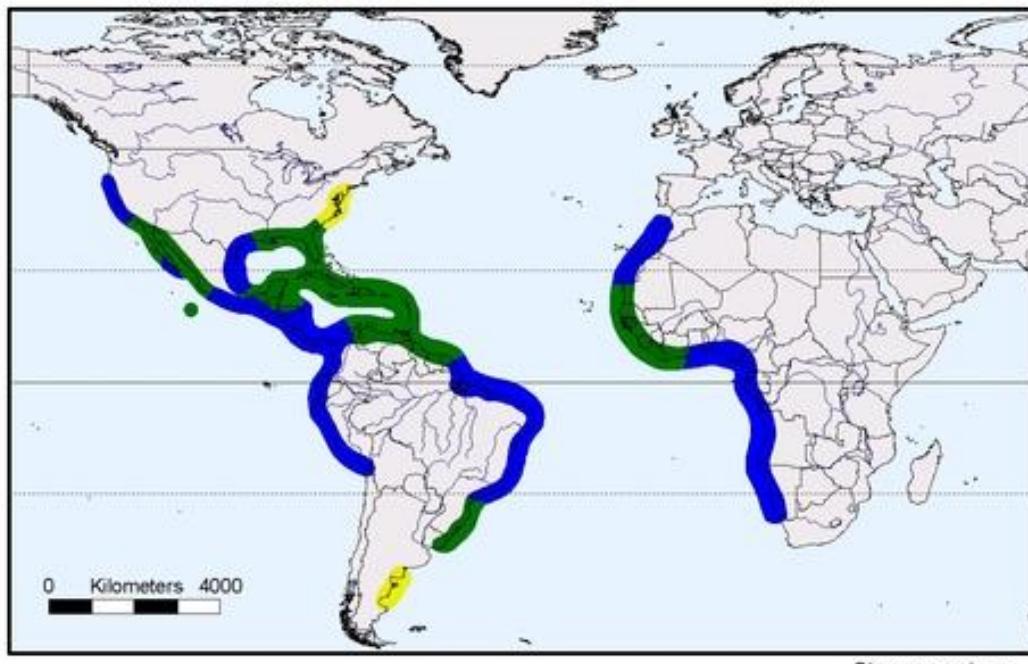


Fig. 2. Geographical range of *Thalasseus maximus*, royal tern.

[<http://www.planetofbirds.com/charadriiformes-sternidae-royal-tern-sterna-maxima>, downloaded 6 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Courtship of the royal tern.

[<http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/card-royal-tern.html>, downloaded 6 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Adult royal tern feeding a chick, in the crèche.

[<http://www.kevinfolemin.com/wildlife/royal-tern-feeding-chick>, downloaded 6 March 2017]

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