
Forster's Tern

Sterna forsteri

Aves — Charadriiformes — Laridae

CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide: Secure (G5)
Statewide: Critically imperiled breeding (S1B)
ESA: No status
USFS: Region 1: No status; Region 4: No status
BLM: No status
IDFG: Protected nongame

BASIS FOR INCLUSION

Limited breeding populations in Idaho; population trend is unknown.

TAXONOMY

Two subspecies, *S. f. forsteri* (western and interior North America) and *S. f. litoricola* (Atlantic and Gulf Coast), have been recognized by some (see McNicholl et al. 2001) based on size and coloration differences, although they are not recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

Forster's terns breed in scattered locations throughout North America. In the western half of the U.S., the largest contiguous breeding population extends from southeast Oregon to eastern Idaho, south to northern Utah and central Nevada, and west to eastern California (McNicholl et al. 2001). There is an estimated 49,500 adult Forster's terns breeding in North America (Kushlan et al. 2002). In the Great Basin, there are approximately 3670 breeding pairs (Ivey and Herziger 2005). As of 1993, approximately 20 of these pairs bred in Idaho on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation (Trost and Gerstell 1994). Recent surveys conducted in 2005 (Idaho Bird Inventory and Survey [IBIS], unpubl. data) indicate that Forster's terns also are breeding at Market Lake Wildlife Management Area (3–5 pairs), Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge (8–10 pairs), and Oxford Slough Waterfowl Production Area (2–3 pairs).

POPULATION TREND

As with many colonial nesters, determining population trends for this species is difficult. Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data indicate an increasing trend during the period 1966–2004 (1.0% per year) and 1966–1979 (6.8% per year), but a decreasing trend (-0.7% per year) during the period 1980–2004 (Sauer et al. 2005). However, only the increasing trend during the period 1966–1979 was statistically significant. In Idaho, BBS data indicate marginally significant sharp declines during the period 1966–2004 (-12.9% per year) and 1980–2004 (-15.3% per year; Sauer et al. 2005). BBS trend data are not available for Idaho during the period 1966–1979. However, these data should be interpreted cautiously due to the potential inappropriateness of using the BBS methodology (i.e., roadside counts) to survey colonial birds (McNicholl et al. 2001).

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

Forster's terns breed primarily in freshwater and brackish marshes, including marshy borders of lakes, islands, or streams. More frequently found in open or deepwater portions of marshes and nesting within large stands of island-like vegetation or on large mats of floating vegetation (e.g., bulrush; McNicholl et al. 2001; Trost and Gerstell 1994). This species generally forages for small (1–10 cm, 0.4–4.0 in long) fish within its breeding marsh as well as in nearby lakes and water channels (McNicholl et al. 2001).

ISSUES

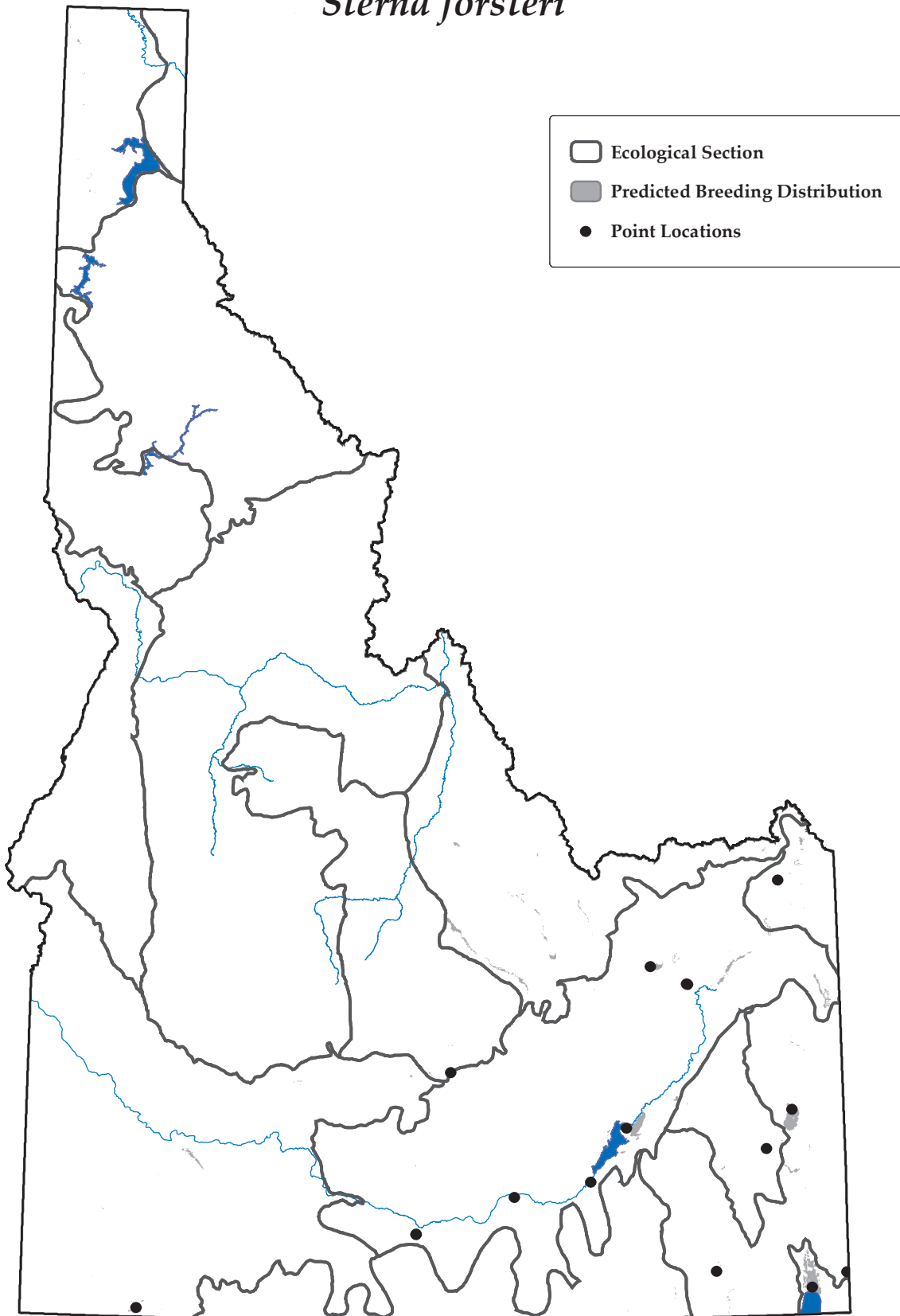
Winter fish kills may be limiting the Forster's tern population in Idaho (Trost and Gerstell 1994). Similar to other marsh-nesting colonial waterbirds, water level fluctuations can result in nest failure (Ivey and Herziger 2005). Since Trost and Gerstell's (1994) study, no statewide assessment of breeding locations and colony sizes has been made.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Maintaining water levels should be a priority (Ivey and Herziger 2005). In addition, consistent monitoring of the breeding colonies should be implemented, such as through the IBIS program, such that all colonies are surveyed every 3 years following the monitoring plan outlined in the Intermountain West Waterbird Conservation Plan (Ivey and Herziger 2005).

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Map created on September 20, 2005
and prepared by Idaho Conservation Data Center.
Sources: Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center,
Idaho Department of Fish and Game (2005). Predicted distribution
is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationships Models (WHR),
A Gap Analysis of Idaho: Final Report. Idaho Cooperative Fish
and Wildlife Research Unit, Moscow, ID (Scott et al. 2002).
Predicted distribution is approximate (for more information, go to
http://www.wildlife.uidaho.edu/idgap/idgap_report.asp).

