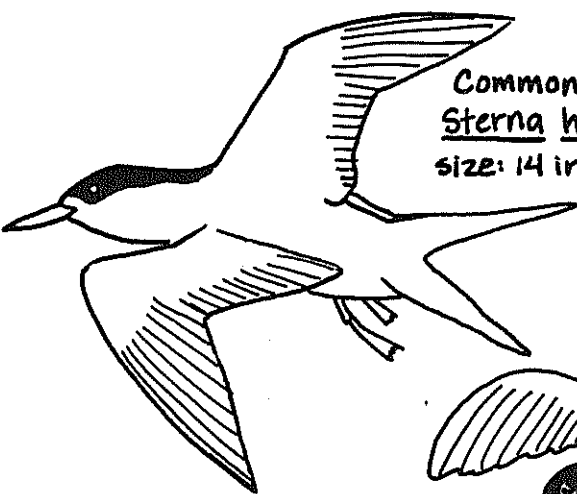


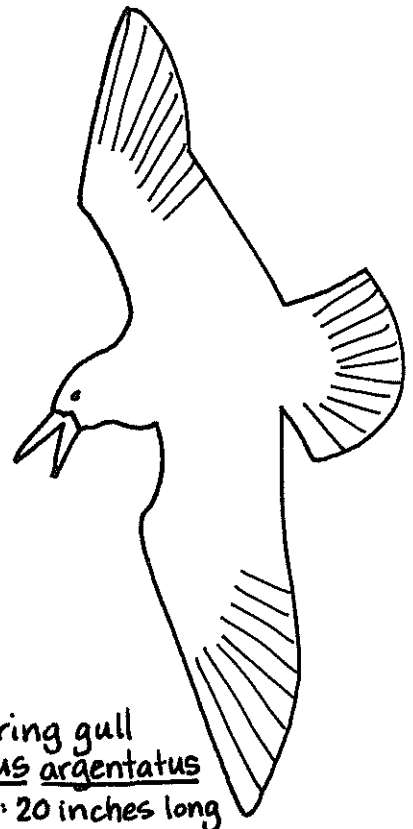
# Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers



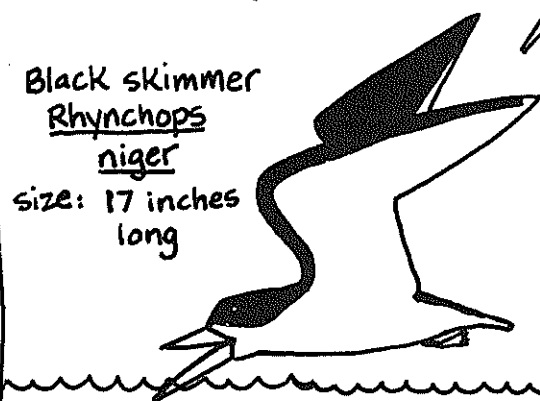
Common tern  
*Sterna hirundo*  
size: 14 inches long



Laughing gull  
*Larus atricilla*  
size: 13 inches long



Herring gull  
*Larus argentatus*  
size: 20 inches long



Black skimmer  
*Rynchops*  
*niger*  
size: 17 inches  
long

Gulls are long-winged birds with slightly hooked bills. They swim, but seldom dive, and are omnivorous. The Herring gull, *Larus argentatus*, is the common "seagull" seen along the shore south to the Carolinas and inland near large bodies of fresh water. These gulls are voracious scavengers with a proclivity toward garbage. As garbage dumps increase, so does the Herring gull population. The expanding population is detrimental to other marine birds because the Herring gull takes over their nesting sites and eats their eggs. Herring gulls also feed on crabs and shellfish. By dropping crabs and mussels on the pavement while flying, the gulls break their shells. At night the gulls congregate in large roosts in protected waters, on beaches, or on islands.

Laughing gulls, *Larus atricilla*, aren't such avid scavengers. Crabs and fish are their preferred food. These birds have a laugh-like call; *Ha ha ha ha ha*, and are common during the summer along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In the summer, their head is light; in the winter it is dark.

Terns are more streamlined than gulls, and usually have forked tails. Their bill is kept pointed down toward the water during flight. Unlike the gulls, terns hover in the air, then dive into the water for fish. Most species of tern have a black cap in the winter and a white cap in the summer. Common terns, *Sterna hirundo*, are pigeon-sized birds with deeply forked tails. Colonies of Common terns nest on islands or isolated peninsulas. Like other terns, this species is very sensitive to human disturbances during nesting. Nesting sites must be protected to maintain the population.

Black skimmers, *Rynchops niger*, are crow-sized relatives of gulls and terns. They have a large, red knife-like bill, the lower half (lower mandible) of which is much longer than the upper half (upper mandible). Skimmers fly low over the water and dip their lower mandible in to catch fish and crustaceans. Black skimmers breed from Cape Cod to Florida; they spend their winters on the southeast coast.