

## Largest congregation of the endangered Black-bellied Tern in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

The Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* Gray, 1832 is one of 23 tern species found in the Indian subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983), and is currently listed as 'Endangered' in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2022). This species is native to countries across south and southeast Asia, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and Vietnam, with occurrences in certain regions of southern China. The global population is estimated to range between 6,700 and 17,000 mature individuals (Kar et al. 2018). Typically inhabiting large rivers and marshes, the Black-bellied Tern prefers breeding in isolated sandy islands within expansive river systems.

However, ongoing anthropogenic pressures on these critical habitats have led to a marked decline in their numbers (Chowdhury et al. 2014). In recent decades, the global population of the Black-bellied Tern has



Eleven individuals of the Black-bellied Tern on one side of the sandbar in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. © Imon Abedin.



Eight individuals of the Black-bellied Tern on the other side of the sandbar (as mentioned in the text) in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. © Imon Abedin.

experienced a drastic decline, leading to concerns that previous estimates may have significantly overestimated the actual numbers (BirdLife International 2024). Currently, over 90% of the remaining

population is confined to India, where more than 1,400 records have been documented. Furthermore, significant populations have been reported from key locations such as the Chambal, Godavari, Ganga and the Mahanadi rivers



An adult, Black-bellied Tern. © Imon Abedin.



Bird with the characteristic of "black belly". © Imon Abedin.



An individual in flight. © Imon Abedin.

(Kar et al. 2018; Gochfeld et al. 2020).

In contrast, their presence in northeastern India is limited primarily to the Brahmaputra River basin in Assam, where sightings have been infrequent and often involve very few individuals (SoIB 2023). Despite historical accounts documenting aggregations exceeding 10 individuals during the 1970s and the species being characterized as gregarious, there is a conspicuous absence of photographic evidence in the eBird database to substantiate such group occurrences (eBird 2024).

On 19 October 2024, during a birding expedition to Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, a flock of 19 Black-bellied Terns were observed near the Aisung area (27.6655° N, 95.2765° E) at around 1330 h. The terns were basking in the sun at the two opposite sides of the sandbar: eleven on the one side and eight on the other side. This sighting is significant for northeast India, particularly for Dibru-Saikhowa National Park as prior records indicate a sparse presence of this species in the region with no documentation of such a large congregation (Choudhury 1998; Rao & Menzies 2019).

However, this species faces significant threats in the region due to dynamic land cover changes, including erosion and rising water levels. The recent sighting occurred near forest village Dadhiya, an area with notable human activity, including the presence of cattle and domestic dogs. Additionally, harmful practices such as fishing using electric generators pose further risks to fish fauna and other aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. Additionally, the

sandbars are used as popular picnic-spots which can jeopardize the survival of this species. Therefore, safeguarding these sandbar habitats is essential as these provide vital refuges for the Black-bellied Tern and other sympatric species.

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